

Cancun
First Place Prose 2004

Mrs. Cunha is a hospice patient. That is all I need to know about her. In a hurry, I pulled her chart down off the rack and read the first sentence in the triage nurse's Catholic-school handwriting ("84 y.o. hospice pt with mental status changes") and stopped. There was more, but it didn't matter. Hospice patients don't come to the ER, so I can get her out of here quickly and clear the bed.

She is parked on the last gurney by the door, a frail little lady with steel-wool hair and a face as fragile and translucent as bone china. The hollows under her cheekbones create bluish shadows and her clavicles leap out at me in stark relief. It has been a while since Mrs. Cunha ate anything solid, I am sure. A finely crocheted blanket is spread carefully over her knees. The brilliant white of the hospital sheet peeks through each lacy loop.

There is a man with her who at first I take to be her husband but then, recalculating ages, I realize must be her son. He holds a sturdy pottery mug that says "Cancun" down the side, the liquid in it long since gone cold, but he is clearly unwilling to put it down, even to shake my hand. He sees me coming now and moves out beyond the bed to intercept me, so he can talk privately to me without his mother hearing. His hands, even holding the mug, are shaking. "Doctor," he greets me, not needing to know my name. "My mother's very confused. Something happened today. You've got to help her. She thinks I'm going to kill her."

"Okay," I say in my most soothing voice. "Let's go sit down somewhere for a second and talk. Mrs. Cunha?" I reach around him to pat her ankle. "We'll be right back."

She looks me dead in the eye. "I want to go back home, you know," she says. "I'm not staying here."

"I wouldn't want you to," I agree; the idea is that hospice patients generally want to die at home, and therefore don't usually come to the hospital when they get worse. At least she hasn't changed her mind.

There is nowhere to sit, so Mrs. Cunha's son and I stand in the corner of the hallway and he tells his story in an urgent whisper. Next to us in the hall is a woman who's probably been beaten up by her boyfriend, blood seeping into a towel pressed to the side of her battered face. She is calmly trying to disengage her earring from her free ear with her other hand, but her eye is swollen nearly shut so she has to do it all blind. Mrs. Cunha's son's eyes keep straying to her with a mixture of pity and disbelief, but he neither addresses her nor suggests that we move away.

Here is the story : Mrs. Cunha has had metastatic breast cancer for three years. She and her son share a sunny apartment on the second floor of an old house in Fairlawn, and she spends her days on the couch watching game shows and drinking tea. This, apparently, is what is in the mug he holds. She has always been lucid and never complains of pain. This morning, when her son went to get her out of bed, she was crying. "My head hurts so much," she told him. "That man banged it last night."

Later, enthroned on the couch, she looked up to where he was chopping vegetables on the cutting board for her homemade chicken soup and said, "Why don't you use that knife on me?"

I imagine the scene, frozen : the son poised to decapitate some celery, slowly raising his head to look across the room; the mother tucked in under her afghan and lap robe. "What?" he says he asked her.

“Why don’t you just kill me now,” she said. “With the knife. It’s quicker.”

He looks at me imploringly, this man who has gone from being a computer salesman to a stay-at-home caretaker, who has learned to make chicken soup, lift his mother into her chair, witness her daily diminishing in front of his eyes – weighing less with each hoist, sleeping less with each week, and now today, for the first time, allowing herself to crack. He went into the bedroom to get his car keys so he could bring her here, he says, and this is what he saw : an old man who is not strong enough. I can’t do this, he says to me, quietly, so she won’t hear. His fingers grip the mug so tightly I am afraid it will break. Can’t you make it so she’ll be like she was? So she won’t be confused?

I look at him for a long moment, wishing I could. “You know I can’t,” I tell him. “I’m sorry.”

He nods quickly, like he’s sorry he even asked.

“Let’s go see her,” I say.

Mrs. Cunha sits regally upright, her fingertips bluish, her skeleton prominent under her skin. It won’t be long, I think, but I don’t tell her son this. After talking with him, I am not sure he would find any comfort in the prediction.

“Everything hurts me,” she says distractedly. “I’m sorry to complain, but I just don’t feel good. I just want to go home and fall asleep and not wake up.”

Her son, across the gurney, is staring silently at her, the hospital’s fluorescent light reflected in a glimmering tear snaking down his cheek. He takes her left hand, and I take her right, and she looks back and forth in a calculating way, trying to determine which of us can grant her wish.

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