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'Til Death Do Us Part The Long Goodbye

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Robert has dementia. His wife Barbara provides his care, alone. He is eighty-six, she is eighty-three. They have no children, and all of their friends are dead or dying. She has no one to help her, other than a nurse's aide who comes every three days to bathe and groom Robert. I sit at the kitchen table as she prepares breakfast. Robert perches on the edge of his chair, body bent, hands slicing the air. She places a plate in front of him. "Who are you?" he bellows.

She caresses his arm. "I'm your wife Barbara; we've been married sixty-two years." A glint of tears appears in her eyes. She leans over to kiss his forehead; he grabs her arm and squeezes. She is unable to pry his fingers loose. I rush to her side to help. He clenches his hand into a fist and swings at my head. I dodge the punch and tumble to the floor. He glares at me, then releases Barbara's arm. She scrambles to my side, winded and pale-faced. She begins to cry; I cradle her shoulders. "I'll be fine," she sobs. "It just gets to me sometimes. He doesn't mean to hurt me."

Robert pivots toward me. “Are you the foreman?” I inform him I am his physician. He scrunches his brow. “I’m a forklift operator, aren’t I?” Barbara shifts to his side and reminds him he is retired. He sits, quite for a moment, then flails his arms in rage. “Where’s my goddamn beer?” He pounds the table, over and over. He has lost twenty pounds over the past year, but he is still brawny.

Barbara fetches a cup of coffee, blows a cool breath, and whispers, “He thinks this is beer.” She is a wisp of a woman, small and slight. Nevertheless, she continues to care for Robert, despite the mental and physical grind. I address nursing home placement, as I do each visit. Predictably, she declines. “A nursing home is a last resort. I can still care for him at home.”

“I think it’s time,” I implore. “His behavior is increasingly violent. I worry about your safety. I worry about his safety.”

She glances out the window, her eyes pinched narrow. “I took a wedding vow. I know it doesn’t mean much nowadays, but it does to me. I will continue as I am.” She grieves and she prostrates, yet she persists. She is of the generation that honours their vows, regardless of the situation.

Robert cocks his head like a bird listening for a worm. “Where’s the motor oil? I need the motor oil.”

Barbara plops into a chair and exhales a tired breath. “We’ll get the oil later, honey.” She ties a bib around his neck and portions bacon and eggs into small pieces. He takes only a few bites; she does not eat. I attempt to make conversation, but

she remains silent, nodding when appropriate. She is discomfited by the suggestion of a nursing home. I apologize if I slighted her. She half-smiles, then stands, anchors Robert in his wheelchair, and pushes him into the living room. She leads me to the door and bids a brief farewell. “Thank you for coming. I appreciate your concern and time.” Her words are sincere, her tone dismissive. I step onto the porch as the door closes. I glimpse in the window; she has collapsed on the couch, a pile of errant hair on her face. My shoulders slump. Letting go is hard.

About the Author

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