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Once Upon a Time

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Can any story be a fairy tale?

For the heroine, imagine an eighty-year-old woman: slight, unsteady, stoic. She avoids physicians completely, until overwhelmed by debilitating pain. She refuses tests, refuses screening, hates hospitals. She is frank, but friendly. Without pain, she would live completely outside the world of health care. She has lost weight over the years, loosening her dentures, and her teeth slide like drawers as she speaks.

You compromise: you will assist with pain relief, she will come for an occasional appointment, will endure your questions, pokes, prods. For pain pills, she will come ... maybe once a year.

For the hero, imagine the woman's adult son, a stranger to you. His mother has always come alone. At first meeting, he sits in lotus position in the exam room. His wild, frizzed hair coupled with his long, thin body, give the appearance of a stalk of broccoli. He is tattooed and gap-toothed. Nicotine-stained fingers rest on his knees.

He has been loud at the front desk, demanding to see you immediately. Now, he remains seated as he speaks, almost childlike in his appeal.

—My mother has fallen; she’s been in bed for days. I can’t get her up, she can’t move.

—Why haven’t you called an ambulance?

—I wanted to, I asked her! She refuses to go. She hates hospitals.

Point taken.

For the castle: imagine a one-bedroom apartment. Trying desperately to become a two-bedroom, the orange-shag main living area has been subdivided by a tattered blanket on a string, partially obstructing the view of a plain mattress on the floor, a stack of dishes, a heap of clothes. Water stains crawl down the walls, cracked light fixtures dangle. Cigarette smoke dulls the colours, thickens the air. The TV chatters.

In the actual bedroom, imagine a single window without treatment, admitting late afternoon light. There is a single bed, and a chest of drawers. The yellows and oranges of the soft, filtering light spilling onto the bed would make a beautiful photograph, except.

Except.

The figure on the bed is naked, skeletal. She lies on a sodden towel. Her impossibly thin leg is shortened, and turned inward. She screams when you touch the leg. When her son helps to turn her over, you see that the skin has worn away on her lower back; there are tendons visible, and bone. You sit close beside her, bend over her, gently touch her protruding cheekbone.

—Mme. Labelle, your hip is broken. You have a pressure ulcer. You need to go to the hospital.

She turns to you—her teeth have been removed. She has sunken, wrinkled and dried into a crust. Her eyes, however, retain the clarity of two shiny beads.

—And what will they do for me there?

Her voice is a whisper; surgery is out of the question, she is too ill.

—We can control your pain. We can try to help you feel better.

—Why not do that here? she asks.

Pause.

—Mme. Labelle, if you stay here, you will die.

She actually smiles; her face folds and creases like origami as she reveals her gums.

—Of course I will die. I will die if you take me there, or I will die if you leave me here.

Point taken.

For the magical being: imagine the ten-year-old, profoundly autistic granddaughter. Refusing to wear clothes, she shrieks periodically, or utters a guttural noise. Hands flapping, she weaves in and out of the conversations, through the rooms of the castle.

You speak to the son:

—We should take her in.

—She wants to stay here.

—I know, but it looks like you have your hands full already.

—I need some help; that's why I called you. That's why I came to see you. I need some help, but I can keep her here.

—What about your family, her family, don't you have siblings?

—They aren't here, they can't help. They live out of town, or they work. They don't think I should keep her here.

He is walking, pacing, endlessly moving. He steers his daughter back into the other room. He closes the bathroom door so she won't drink the hand sanitizer.

—She will die here.

Finally, he stops moving. He sags and leans on the wall.

—I know that. She knows that. If you put her in the hospital, she will just die faster. She made me swear to her that I would keep her here.

—But surely she knows that you might not be able to look after her along with your daughter. She knows that you can't do everything.

—But I have to try, don't I?

You gaze at each other, considering this question, for some time.

For the Fairy Godmother: imagine a physician, old enough to have seen many deaths, but new enough that each one still erodes you.

Imagine knowing that death is supposed to come with peaceful music, clean sheets, weeping family members at a bedside vigil, neighbours with casseroles and comfort. Imagine also knowing that death does not always follow the rules; that death can be messy, surprising, and inconvenient.

Possibly, you are not the Fairy Godmother at all, but the Witch. Which one calls an ambulance? Which one lets the heroine remain in the castle?

The Godmother (Witch?) should be granting the patient's wish ... but who wishes to die like this? Is she in her right mind? Can she make this decision?

Imagine asking these questions, then asking them again, and again: one hundred, one thousand times ... as weeks pass.

For extra characters, imagine a posse of Health-care Workers, sent to assist at the castle, arriving armed with plastic tubing, gauze, and optimism.

Imagine horrified looks, telephone accusations, confrontations, and fear.

Imagine pain medication, clouding the heroine's mind.

Imagine seeing her vacillate between past and present, no longer able to discuss her own fate, laughing with her long-deceased husband, shouting that she is late. Late for what?

Imagine the hero—amid the moans of the heroine, the cries of the magical being, and the shouts of the posse—grasping desperately for you, begging for help.

Imagine mutiny.

No, every story cannot be a fairy tale after all.

The true ending is only death: in the hospital, with a tangled gown hiked up around the waist, with no one to push the button on the pain pump, with no one to give sips from the water glass, with no wishes granted.

And no one in the story lives Happily Ever After.

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