

Routine Procedures

I.

The Price is Right played on the television mounted near the ceiling. Each swing of the doors I hoped to glimpse my husband amid beds with railings and blue scrubs. From somewhere behind the waiting room a woman's voice: "Help me! Someone, please!" Her wails mixed with Drew Carey's voice on low volume: "Come on down!"

Finally, Ray was wheeled out, silly in cap and gown, smiling, joking. Eyes less lucid, a more lopsided smile, he was still himself. The routine procedure had gone as expected. The giant bed was wheeled to a makeshift room of curtains. Ray made breezy comments to me and the nurses. They said the doctor would arrive soon and drew the front curtain. Alone, we relaxed a little. I adjusted his pillow.

He started shifting a bit, tentatively at first, grabbing the railing and lifting himself to bear weight on his right side. Soon, he was grimacing, gasping for breath. "Jesus. Something..." Our eyes locked. "Something is wrong." I watched the color disappear from his face. He was sweating around his temples. I poked my head out of the curtain to ask for help. "The doctor will be here soon." He is a ghost. He is drenched. His face is contorted, and he is trying not to yell. "Something is not right!" I say sternly out the curtain, pulling it back so they can see the struggle themselves.

It takes one hour before morphine with no effect on the careening pain, another hour for Percocet and at last some regular breathing, some relief. A week in a Step-Down Unit, four units of blood transfused for a punctured artery draining blood into a cavity I did not know people had. Months of downtime will pass before he recovers.

II.

Covid-19 is ravaging the world. My husband

and I have not left the house in three weeks.
We suppose we may not be leaving much
until there is a vaccine next year. We worry
for friends who may have it, who struggle
to breathe and relax despite lack of tests
and ventilators and hospital beds. We all
talk on the phone because what else
is there to do?

I speak with a dear friend
who shares the story of her father's death
from a new perspective this time. She says
The Price Is Right played at the hospital while a
woman wailed for help as her father slipped away.

The world feels very surreal, as if her moment
at the hospital and mine were folded into one
horrible fake memory concocted in a lab
or a diabolical imagination – What the Grotesque
Is Like or How to Worry at the Hospital.
I imagine our prayers were similar, too:
“Universe or whatever, please don't take him
from me.” And now Ray must avoid catching
the virus because he is more frail now,
so we sit at home and write poems,
watch the numbers of infected people and
recoveries and deaths creep higher by the day,
so many people praying, “Please don't take
her from me” or “Please, someone help me.”



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