

His breathing is

croo

ked --

she straightens it with the fine-sharp edge of her thumb. Air hangs from his mouth and she locks it into place with a one -- two -- three press into his trachea.

inhale--

[WHEEZE]

[COUGH]

[PHLEGM]

exhale--

She looks him in the eye, his parching, closed lid and laughs at the red lines like worms crawling from the rheum. He was a big man, and she, a small woman, their shadows a juxtaposed puddle of trust and wrath.

Her backbone stiffens as he gasps, somewhere between wakeful and dead. He struggles and she reminds herself, this is what she wants. She knows it's what she *wants*.

She presses hard.

[HACK]

[HACK]

[WHEEEEEEZE]

Pale legs straddle his stomach, two pillows flanking concave ribs. He sleeps near naked, which makes this more comical; his flaccid self is bare flat against his legs, and he is all bone and sweat baked skin and milky tongue. She loves him like this. She loves the feeble, warped body beneath her girth.

She pulls back her thumb and all that's left is a little bruise. It's the size of a raisin, dark mauve against snow white. He is gasping and writhing, but still alive.

It's what she wants.

She reminds herself again.

*This* is what she wants.

She goes to work on his neck: two thumbs working in unison. He reaches up -- a reflex -- but stays down and doesn't fight.

[GUTTURAL GASP]

His hands find her thighs and they are cold, like little corpses sprouting from their knuckle tombs. He tried hard over the years. Now, he's resigned, a calming palm across her flesh to tell her, "It's okay."

The blame will fall on her -- for his illness, for caregiving, for the loss. They'd staple it to her back, a red sign that will read "Kick me into the pits hell!" She will go to jail, likely die there, too.

She reminds herself again: this *is* what I want.

They're both in their late 50s. Much too old to start again. And he is too old to be fighting a disease that proved much stronger than the pair combined. For years, they fought his body. They fought with pills and IVs and oxygen machines and operations but the disease was a bloody creature with leukocytes for claws and fungi for fangs. Complication after complication, infection after infection. He wasn't giving up, but neither was it, and by proxy, she was in this fight until the end.

Which--

[COUGH]

--couldn't come--

[WHEEZE]

--soon enough.

And while they were both too old, she was, still, too young to be a caregiver. There were no retirements or vacations or even nights out on the town. She loved him, but hated this part, more than she was willing to say. He knew this, too. He saw it in the way she groaned and sighed. All her work was for nothing --

He was going to die, sooner or later.

So he said, "I will die tonight," between an episode of *Law and Order* and the nightly news.

She thought he was joking, then learned he was not.

She yelled at him, “Don’t talk like that. This isn’t a game!”

But he groveled, and it was sad to see a grown man beginning on his knees. Even more so when he struggled to get back up. Then she thought, *he may be right*. It was dangerous and puerile, but right for them. It was with coltish idealism that they approached treatment..

Now, the same levity guided them through expiry.

She loves him, she knows: from his grey hairs to his varicose veins; the liver spots on his wrist and the candle wax in his ears; the failure of his lungs and the clots deep in his legs; the heart failing, too, in each way but one.

He loves her.

Up, down, sideways

and crooked

He loves her enough

to let himself go.

This isn’t what she wants, but she realizes

*This is how she says I love you: honoring his last request.*

This time, she says aloud: “This is what *you* want.”

This time, she uses her whole strength to choke him until he sleeps for good.

Through her pain, she sits taller. With her whole hand, she presses down on his throat.

Each organ spasms against his cellophane skin:

“thank you!

thank you!

[GURGLE]

[RATTLE]

“I love you --

too.”

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