

The Ambulance

I park my work car at the end of a country lane, the jacarandas are gently framing the edges of historic streets, the old cottages are nestled in old gardens. I can hear birds deep in the trees and it is like time has stood still. It is a sleepy village.

I take a big breath of winter air. I have not met this palliative care patient before. I have to force the wrought iron gate open and the latch is stiff with rust. I make a mental note to go around the back at my next visit. I am surprised when someone answers the front door, it is so still and quiet. The door struggles to scrape across the carpet and it is a slow greeting to the patient's carer. She looks hostile towards me even after I have introduced myself. "I can't do this anymore, I have a bad back and I just cannot do this anymore!" She is his resentful ex wife. I can see that she is exhausted and has reached her limit. Her deep wrinkles speak to working hard and playing hard. Now she just looks hard. She is greyhound thin and twitchy for more than her next cigarette. Her tight hipster jeans swing a jangle of chains and keys. Her mobile phone hangs from her grooved neck in a pink shoe sock. She looks older than she is and her agitation punches her chewing gum, and forces her pacing.

Then I see him. I have never seen anyone so close to death sitting upright. He looks frightened and I shake his frail hand putting all my kindness into my smile. He is jaundiced, his leaving eyes fluro yellow, his jaw slack, and skin swollen with malignancy. We talk for a while, I am gentle and quiet and it seems to be what he needs. I take on his energy and vocabulary - we talk about being "buggered", "pulling up stumps", "hitting the wall", about being "stuffed". I talk with tenderness and it is like we have known each other a long time. I gain his trust as I hold his cold purple hands. I try my pulse oximeter but cannot get a

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reading. I cannot find a manual pulse. I keep talking quietly and knowingly and he points me to his feet. He allows me to unwrap his velcro joggers and soaked socks - his freezing feet have pitting marbled oedema, his skin is an inkpad taking my fingerprints. I hold his feet like a prayer and take the moment with him. It gives me pause and I feel the humility and complete privilege of this time. I check his mouth but I didn't need to, he is frothing thrush and unable to swallow. He shifts uncomfortably and I ask his ex wife for any analgesia. He has none. We find expired Nurofen in the back of the kitchen draw. He cannot swallow the second tablet.

I change chairs so I can face him directly. It is just him and I. He looks at me with questions in his eyes and enormous sadness. I know he wants to die at home. I know his carer cannot look after him anymore. She has hurt her back and there is no one else to help. A son. But he works. A son? I am hopeful. Maybe he can help? No. He is busy, he is the chancellor at a city university. I have many thoughts at once – I think family, money, time, rescue, wild card. I choose to say, you must be very proud of him. It turns out to be the right thing to say... he nods and there is a rare smile. I meet his tired accepting eyes. Is there any unfinished business? I ask. Is there anyone that you want to see, or anything that you need to do? It seems too difficult to stay at home. You are losing ground. I think that your time is very short, I don't think that you have very long to live now. His eyes meet mine. His voice is suddenly strong. How long? We maintain eye contact. Anytime from here on, a day or two, not much more than that. His shoulders come down, he relaxes and there is another smile. I am glad he says, that is such a relief. Thank you. He squeezes my hand and I win a wink.

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I spend the rest of my time talking to doctors, bed managers and the ED. I speak to his chancellor son who insists dad goes to a private hospital. I encourage him to come see his dad. I tell him he is dying and if he wants to see his dad he cannot wait for end of term. He will check his schedule.

I come in to say goodbye to him after my calls and he is laying down on the lounge now nursing a hot water bottle on his lap. I tell him the ambulance is coming soon. Never been in an ambulance before. His face is lighting up. Will it have sirens? I tell him he can ask them to have the sirens on. He beams. You are easy to please I tell him, grinning. He tells me he feels so much better now. He looks different and there is a peace about him. We shake hands by way of farewell. Go easy I tell him. You too he says. We share the look that says we will not see each again and that is enough.