

## The Vigil

The white numbers on the digital wall clock displayed 7:03. The window framed a dark and rainy Friday evening. Dolores Feldman sat erect and uncomfortable, not looking at the clock, not looking at the window, in the mauve-colored visitor chair just inside the glass door of the fourth cubicle in the ten-bed intensive care unit. This was her fifth consecutive evening sitting in the same chair, in the same cubicle, at the same bedside, maintaining a vigil she started when she found her husband unresponsive in the kitchen and called 9-1-1.

“The CT shows that your husband suffered a massive stroke with a possible brain stem infarct,” Dr. Zeller, the emergency room doctor, had told her after an agonizing and chaotic wait. “We’re going to give him tPA, send him to the ICU, and keep him on the ventilator for a while. He will be followed by neurology.”

At the time, Dolores wasn’t at all sure what any of that meant. In the forty-one years they had been married, Jack had never been in the hospital before, had rarely even been sick enough to miss work. He had been her rock, stoically seeing her through two miscarriages, a hysterectomy, and three bouts of pneumonia.

“We may not know anything for several days,” Dr. Banta, the neurologist, had declared the morning after Jack was admitted.

Dolores didn’t know what that meant either, but it didn’t sound encouraging. Since then, she had lost count of the number of caregivers that had been in and out of the cubicle, each doing a specific job. Or so she assumed, since some looked as though they

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weren't actually *doing* anything. Certainly, no one was attempting to explain to her what was happening. But, she never really asked either. Maybe if she didn't know, she foolishly reasoned, it would be all right. Isn't ignorance, after all, bliss?

The cubicle, with its small window overlooking the roof of the parking garage, was eerily quiet. Outside, there were voices, hurried footsteps, alarms, reminders that life pulsed erratically all around her. Inside, there was only the rhythmic whoosh of the ventilator and the occasional raindrop tapping against the window like an index finger, inviting her to close her eyes, let her chin droop to her chest, to dream that none of this was actually happening.

Vaguely, as through the fog of fatigue, Dolores became aware that the noises outside were closer and louder. Something was happening in the fifth cubicle. Probably another code, she told herself, another patient locked in the desperate and ultimately futile struggle with death. No surprise ("The patient next door has been coding off and on all day," Sue, the respiratory therapist, had muttered once when she had to interrupt what she was doing with Jack and rush out of the cubicle). Death was in the building and on the prowl but had so far passed over the fourth cubicle as though someone had splashed the glass door with lamb's blood.

So, not only was Dolores alone, but she felt alone. In spite of the presence of her husband only a few feet away, she felt as though she was the only human being left on Earth. But she was getting used to being left alone. In this frenetic, high tech, and self-contained universe of minute-to-minute change and chaotic response, Jack Feldman had become a constant. And that constancy had rendered him uninteresting, an endless series

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of electronic blips on a monitor that no-one looked at, a beating heart covered by a white sheet.

She sagged lower in the chair and allowed her eyes the luxury of darkness. Gradually everything around her began to disappear, including the constant and incomprehensible sounds that sometimes seemed to assault her in marauding waves. So goes the light, so goes the world, she thought.

All too soon, the fantasy of escape, of noninvolvement, of pretending this was just a bad dream from which she would eventually awaken with Jack holding her in his powerful arms, was shattered by the sudden appearance of a tall, lean man wearing a knee-length white lab coat over green scrub clothes, more of a shadowy presence than a person, a strong gust of wind on a cloudy day. She opened her eyes and adjusted her position in the uncomfortable chair.

The man quickly scanned the room with eyes that were both vague and weary. He moved to within two feet of her, standing over her like a building, casting a shadow across the empty face of her husband. “Mrs. Feldman,” Dr. Banta began, shifting his gaze in her direction but not really seeing her. “It may be time to review our options.”

Dolores considered this for a moment, still not totally convinced she was awake. “What do you mean?” she asked finally.

His dark, crescent of a mouth puckered; the fingers on his left hand twitched ever so slightly. “I mean, your husband may never get any better.” He paused as though allowing time for her to process, to respond. When she didn’t, he sighed impatiently. “He may remain in this state indefinitely. This will require the insertion of a tracheostomy

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tube and feeding tube and the eventual transfer to another facility...one that specializes in that kind of care.”

Dolores leaned forward and tried to look past the doctor toward her husband. She didn't like the sound of the words, the subtle nuance that told its own story. She especially didn't like or fully understand 'that kind of care.' She drew in a deep breath. “How soon will you know?”

The neurologist hesitated while his head swayed slightly to the right. At that moment, it was clear to Dolores that he already knew the outcome, that it was as obvious to him as childbirth was to an obstetrician. “One or two days,” he replied without looking at her.

She nodded as though she understood, but she didn't really. Time, as precious as gold dust, was sifting through her fingers and she was powerless to stop it. A hundred different images, most of them very unpleasant, suddenly flashed through her mind. “So...what are you telling me?” The question, simple and direct, was automatic and one she didn't really need to ask. Tears massed in her eyes; she blinked them away.

“Mrs. Feldman,” Dr. Banta began, little beads of sweat dotting his forehead, “Your husband seems to have lapsed into a persistent vegetative state. And because he is medically stable, we can't keep him in the ICU any longer.”

Now all the images she had been creating over the past five days coalesced into one gigantic gray-tinted mural. She would spend every day of the rest of her life holding vigil in some remote and impersonal nursing home as though it was a kind of purgatory for the hapless but healthy, the unfortunate survivors of the holocaust of love.

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She had been loyal and she had been supportive; she had loved her husband exclusively since she was eighteen. She had done nothing to deserve this horror, she thought. Without thinking, she became angry at the great abstract health care system, angry with Jack for falling within its evil clutches. Then she became angry with herself for being angry with him.

While Dolores wrestled with these inner demons, Dr. Banta glanced at his watch. “Mrs. Feldman...there is an alternative,” he said, speaking softly as though he was about to reveal a dark and sinister secret.

Immediately, she came to her senses. “What is it?” Her voice was low and guarded.

He shifted his gaze back and forth between husband and wife. “We...could remove your husband from the ventilator.”

“How will that help?” she asked. “Won’t he still have to be transferred?”

The doctor’s eyes widened behind his glasses. How do you reconcile ignorance with disbelief, the reckless non-acceptance of a harsh reality? “I don’t think so.”

“But...you said...” Then the cloud of fatigue slowly lifted from her brain, drifted on without dropping its heavy load of cold rain. “Oh...you mean...” She stopped as though actually saying the words would constitute some kind of unpardonable sin, the dreaded final acceptance of the stark and icy reality she desperately wanted to avoid.

She had, of course, thought about Jack’s dying off and on ever since she called 9-1-1. However, for the last three or four days, she had settled into a routine. The vigil had become a life unto itself. There was nothing before it; there would be nothing after it. Just an endless chain of lonely days playing themselves out in a fishbowl.

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Dr. Banta nodded, grateful for not having to clarify the obvious, and took a step toward the glass door. "I'll be back in the morning," he said. "You think about it tonight and please let me know then what you decide. We will of course assist you either way." Then he was gone, swallowed up by the outside world, the world teeming with life and the promise of life.

Dolores was alone again. Occasionally, a disconnected voice would reach her, syllables flying through the air as though someone was shouting across a lake. She stood up and moved to the bed. For a long time, she peered at her husband, lying peacefully under the sheet, eyes closed, chest rising and falling in perfect synchrony with the ventilator. She extended her hand toward his pale forehead, then drew it back as though her touch would burn his skin like a crucifix burning a vampire. The body, the face still resembled Jack Feldman, but he had been transformed, somehow transfigured.

She took a step back and glanced up at the monitor, saw the same numbers, the same patterns she had been seeing for the past three days. She didn't know what they meant, but she knew they hadn't changed. Then, suddenly resolved, she closed her eyes and extended her hand tentatively toward the exposed hand of her husband. When she touched the ends of his fingers, she was surprised at how warm they felt, how vaguely familiar, seemingly pulsing with life.

And for an instant, she had a giddy notion that everything would be all right: There would be no decision to make, no nursing home to test her love, sap what remained of her strength. Jack would wake up, rip the tube out of his trachea, climb out of the bed, and simply take her home as though none of this had ever happened. They would share a glass of wine and a good laugh, maybe even make love like they used to.

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As the fantasy continued to develop, she opened her eyes and dared to gaze at him, study him. But he never made a move, didn't even flutter his eyelids. She released her grip on his fingers and retreated to the chair, trying very hard not to allow herself to fall into the deep hole of depression from which there was little chance of escape.

Occasionally, Dr. Banta's words would intrude themselves into her thinking. "There is an alternative..." he had said. Was that what Jack would have wanted? Was this the inevitable? Was she prepared to face it? So many questions; so few answers. She was now sorry they had never discussed it, had apparently never even considered it, arrogantly thinking of themselves as immortal as their love for each other. They would simply grow old together and die at the same time, locked in each other's arms.

Dolores sank into the chair as though it was a pool of quicksand. Slowly, her mind began to review the last forty-one years of her life. Jack had been the central figure in that life for every one of those years, but especially the last five when they had more time to spend together. They shopped, they worked on the house and garden, they did volunteer work, and they traveled. Short trips mostly, exploring the countryside, staying in inexpensive bed and breakfast inns.

She especially remembered one of the last of these trips they took together, a year ago last fall. They had driven up into Michigan, visiting first Dearborn and then Frankenmuth. On their third day out, they drove to the Soaring Eagle casino near Mt. Pleasant, where they both lost twenty dollars playing the slot machines. They ate an early dinner at the buffet, then got on the road about six-thirty. They were headed for a bed and breakfast somewhere near Prudenville in the Pere Marquette State Forest.

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The drive up Route 27, with the sun setting to the west, was beautiful. However, when they got past Harrison, they somehow made a wrong turn and drove deep into the forest. Night fell fast and they were lost, stumbling blindly in the dark while the temperature outside the car plummeted. By nine-thirty, Dolores had made herself so frightened that she actually began to cry, tears streaming down her unwrinkled face.

Jack pulled the car to the side of the narrow two-lane road they were on, reached over, and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her gently on the forehead and peered into her moist eyes. "We'll be all right," he said calmly. "We'll have a few more minutes of this unexpected adventure and then we'll be in the clear." He kissed her again and again until she managed a weak smile. He answered with a reassuring smile of his own. "You just sit back and relax and have faith that God has picked out a destination for us already. We shouldn't struggle against the inevitable, but rather just let it happen."

He had been right that cold, dark night. Fifteen minutes later, they emerged out of the forest into Lovells. From there, they drove to I-75 and spent the night in Grayling. And the next morning they were on their way back home as if everything had worked out exactly as they had planned it.

In the quiet solitude of the fourth cubicle, Dolores smiled for the first time in five days. Memories can be very powerful, she realized. Once again, she stood up and walked over to her husband. This time she didn't hesitate to tenderly stroke his forehead, just as he had done to her so many times before. They were stumbling blindly in the dark, but soon they would be in the clear. She bent down and kissed him softly on the cheek, in a spot just above the soggy tape that secured the endotracheal tube.



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Then she disengaged from him, walked over to the window, and watched the rain fall gently from the iron gray sky. Jack was watching with her, just as he always had, just as he always would.