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## **I Was There When You were Dying**

Alex came up from the basement to help staple a king-size bedsheet across the archway to the dining room so Stanley wouldn't have to see his wife dying. Alex wrenched the two halves of the ladder apart and as he climbed up in his heavy work boots, the light from the 13<sup>th</sup> street windows gave his hair and clothes an ethereal shine from the thin layer of dust coating his plaid shirt, tan pants and the wisps of sandy brown hair peeking out from under his baseball cap.

He was breathing heavily between his teeth, muttering to himself how he didn't want to be here. Why was he the one who got sent up. The janitor crew were all having lunch and schmoozing together when the call came through: "Two C needs help puttin' up something. Take a ladder, hey you, Alex."

"Ah not me, they're ...and I think she was just in the hospital"

"Go guy, get movin'"

"Motherfucker."

I don't remember the ride in the ambulance from the hospital to their apartment even if I rode in the back with her. I couldn't look at her the whole way back, just tried to shut out her moaning. I squeezed my fists and pressed them together down on my thighs, as they rolled her onto the gurney like she was burlap bag filled with feed corn. Yes, of course I was there when they loaded her on, but then we were in the dining room. I couldn't remember when we ordered the hospital bed either, but there it was where the dining room table had been. I can't remember where we put that big, old walnut table. It was much too big to hide.

She was lying on her back stretched full out – she never lost any height as she aged – her arms hung loose by her sides as her fingers clawed at the sheets. Her silver fingernails were long and pointed way beyond the tips of her bony, violet veined fingers. They had kept growing all those weeks in the hospital even though every other part of her was shrinking and dying.

I stared down at her face. Her skin, still alabaster, was now translucent supported only by her cheekbones. One small shaft of light came in the room from high in the corner of the window in back of her. It made one side of her face sharper than the other, its crevices like small paths leading down to her chin. Her eyes looked as if they drowned in their sockets rimmed with a purple sheen. She had gone once a week to the beauty parlor at the corner, for the last 57 years, no matter how many times it changed hands, to have her hair washed and dried under one of those big standing machines with the heavy metal hoods that enveloped her head. Bangs and a shoulder-length bob, snow white with natural gray accents worn the same way since the forties. The only difference then was that the top part of her was kind of a bun in the style of the times that my father liked. Now her much admired hair hung in dark spindles by her ears, showing pink patches of scalp.

Her body barely lifted the covers. In fact, it was warm enough so that all she really needed was a sheet, but I couldn't take off the blankets to have to look at what else wasn't there. I gazed down and as I started to pull the blankets off, my stomach curled around itself and shriveled to a pin as I started to gag. I thought I saw her look at me and her lips almost formed the word "love". Tears blurred my eyes, I sputtered saliva to save a scream. I really wanted to slap her and slap her and slap her. Slap some sense into her, slap her until she gets it..

I lifted her head, so light and so heavy, to give her water. My mother was dying as the liquid ran straight through her.

My mother said to me not so long ago, "I wasn't there when you were born."

