

THE DEATH OF AN APPLE MAN

He was on his deathbed. It was true even if nobody would say it. Everyone else skirted around it and said things in the nice polite ways but he was annoyed by this and so made a point of speaking out with harsh blunt comments about the truthfulness of the situation that were arresting and made people fidget and go quiet. He found that this was exhausting in its own way so soon enough he gave it a rest, so to speak.

He did find relief in the slightly perverse humor of such comments so he went on with the jokes in his own head, projecting terribly candid comments onto a hospital staff well-versed in the pleasant professionalism standard in large regional hospitals. *Nurse, please wheel Mr. Finley's deathbed into room three.... Eat up Mr. Finley, you don't have many meals left.... Would you like me to recline your deathbed for you, Mr. Finley?*

The jokes worked, but only early on and in just a slight way, to temper the situation and help him “to get by.” They could never be enough to handle it entirely because he was in a pain that was real and constant and tiring, a pain that wasn't otherworldly, not unimaginable to healthy people when they do their best to imagine being in his condition, a real almost ordinary pain that differed in degree and duration, not nature, from other pains he had known in his life. *People don't really understand that*, he now thought.

The pain had the effect of turning him quiet, more quiet than he had been even in his later years. He would sit and listen to the equipment around and through him, the drips and the beeps, the clicks and the whirrs. Many of his hours were spent sleeping but the wakeful ones were largely made up of his looking around and coming to all sorts of conclusions on things he had little practical experience with. He guessed at the prices and basic functionality of the equipment around his bed—the more knobs, switches, screens,

tubes and moving parts were assumed to up the price and operative range. He thought on the off-white walls, speckled white tile floors, grey drapes and generic décor. He assumed, correctly, that the rooms next door and down the hall, the rooms on the floors above and beneath, looked more or less identical to his. He guessed at the amount of money that this type of uniformity must save in building costs. He wondered where the contractors cut corners and for a time became slightly embittered by the generic nature of it all. *They couldn't have made this stuff look more sterile and utilitarian*, he decided early on. *We're dying in here, couldn't they have laid a nice wood finish over some of this stuff, maybe some dark leather here and there? Couldn't they help a guy's death feel a little classier, not so damn serial?*

He settled on this opinion and let it bother and grate at him for a short time but the bitterness didn't last long because the pain shouted over such little thoughts and didn't allow them to fester for too long. The pain proved to be purifying in some ways, purging the superfluous and leaving just the solid things. And so he began to accept it, believing that the setting and situation were just what they should be. *All the finished wood and leather in the world isn't going to change the nature of it*, he decided.

He felt a pride at this type of clarity and began to use it very much like a tool as he did his thinking and reflecting. But then in all of this thinking he sensed an approach toward something hidden. He felt he was getting into things he knew he shouldn't—the long buried things, the long buried for a reason things. He was compelled though and was helpless to stop it, and so he waded into them cautiously, suspecting he could retreat before it all got to be too much. He sensed this was dangerous and unwise, that beating around the bush would only serve to clear a pathway to the thick tangled roots of it. And he was

correct in that intuition because when he arrived there it was in an instant—vicious and comprehensive—and it came with an image and an emotion. It was all Sara Douglas.

She was sitting in the passenger seat of his old Chrysler, turned halfway in her seat, looking at him directly. Her eyes were soft and blue, strong without being abrasive and self-assured enough to be unguarded. Hovering around the young creases at the corner of her eyes and floating in the unseen muscles near her mouth was an expression that seemed ready to touch down but never quite did. It was a look caught somewhere between emotions. The other details of the night settled in as vague backdrops—he couldn't remember where exactly they had been or what they had been doing before arriving in that place—but he knew it was the last night before she left and he once again knew the look of her face.

She had been talking, talking about the adventure ahead of her most likely, and then she finished her thought and there was a pause, a wait, and that face. The silence allowed an intimation of the moment's singular nature, a sense that all that had led to it was good and right and he felt, more than thought, that perhaps her brief silence was an invitation to speak out, say something, a passive-aggressive plea for him to stop her, keep her close for now, forever. It was salient and simple but he had balked. Hesitated too long. Sara Douglas blinked, and then turned forward.

The moment had passed as quickly as it had arrived but the cloudy emotional darkness stayed for much much longer. He had fought against the darkness with attempts at convincing himself that if it was meant to be, that it still could be, that this would only make them stronger, that God works in mysterious ways and that all would be well.

After time the mystery came out of it however. It hadn't made them stronger. It had been an end moment just as he had feared. He worked to convince himself that it had not been meant to be after all and eventually he thought himself successful. He saw himself thoroughly convinced. So it scared him now, sixty-four years later, to find the old feeling back within him.

He opened his eyes. His wife was sitting in her place next to his hospital bed. He turned his head slightly and she smiled at him. She loved him. There was no doubt about that. And he loved her. He loved her the best he could for every one of their sixty-two years together.

By the time he had met his wife he was well practiced at pushing thoughts of Sara Douglas away. By that point he had become happy again, as happy as anyone could reasonably expect, especially in the face of all the disadvantage there is in this world. He considered himself lucky to have met his wife and he knew he shouldn't complain. She was good to him and she made him smile and she could very well have found someone else. Still, he couldn't help but compare at the beginning. The comparison forced itself on him and nagged and nagged.

Early on he told himself that time would make up for it, that something that was good at first could be something great if it lasted for decades. He told himself that maybe he was comparing apples and oranges and that oranges were, for him, an acquired taste. He thought he could be an orange man. He even came to believe that maybe he was supposed to have been an orange man all along. He had become thoroughly convinced, so much so that Sara Douglas left his mind for years at a time, then decades. He thought he had buried the feelings and the image down so deep that they couldn't possibly survive. But she was

back and she was back right now, sixty-four years later. *That has got to mean something*, he thought, *that has got to mean something*.

He once again felt caught in a terrible sensation that hung in the air as when something expensive, something truly valuable, something irreplaceable, has been knocked from its place but has yet to crush across the floor. It was the same agonizing premonition of perilous outcome and paralyzing realization of helplessness, hitting simultaneously and with blunt force, sixty-four years after her look then turn of head from the passenger side of the old Chrysler. It thrashed and built up hot inside him for a span of time that belonged outside of the narrow range measured by the minute and second hands on the generic wall clock opposite his bed or white-gold wristwatch hanging loosely on his wife's wrinkled arm.

He reached out and grabbed her hand and started as if to speak. It seemed unfair, hurtful, even cruel possibly, to say something now all these years later and so close to the end. But his need for relief was dire and nothing else presented itself as an escape.

She looked at him and waited, concerned but not alarmed. He hadn't spoken since earlier that morning when the polite but preoccupied nurse who handled most of the routine had asked him this or that about the I.V. in his arm. His voice cracked and carried little weight.

"I've been an apple man, honey. And I'm so so sorry."

She heard it fine, thought on it for a moment, didn't understand but didn't think it odd. She attributed it to his condition as most people do around deathbeds. She made her best guess and went to the hall to ask the nurse to bring an apple, misunderstanding his statement more severely than anyone but he could possibly ever know. The nurse soon

brought an apple and knife, placed them on the tray, added a glad comment about his wanting solid food and left. His wife took them both up from the tray and began cutting the apple into thin manageable slices. He watched and the sight of it crushed across him and hurt all over in a deep pain that was distinct from routine and seemed rooted at the ambiguous heart of him.

He lay there, on his deathbed with eyes now closed, and listened to the moist crunch of the plastic knife moving through the apple. Tears built at the corners of his eyes and rolled individually down his cheeks. He lay in quiet and felt the pain out thoroughly, let it wash around and through him. He let it in and over and about. After six decades, he let it. And the duration of the pain was brief, relatively speaking, for it wasn't long before there was the fading, the melting away into something somehow approaching peaceful.