



Until

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It was not until I saw you perched over your wife's bed, in your gown and mask, that I understood just how different the goodbye at the end of this visit would be. Standing on the threshold of her room, this realization barreled through and nearly leveled me.

Hours earlier we had spoken on the phone, methodically, calmly. The tempo of our conversation betrayed the amount of time she had left. Although the exact timeline was unknown, we knew it was finite.

I had not met you. I had met your wife only briefly. Yet, over the phone, I was telling you that she was dying. At first, I struggled to say it plainly. Even though I knew it was better to be direct, I felt the impulse to circumvent this reality and lead you away from the pain. You were safe in the comfort and warmth of your home, on your end of the phone. You did not know what was unfolding under the cold fluorescent lights of the hospital. Until I told you.

I stumbled through it: "We're worried that she's starting the process of dying."

But you were steadfast and needed the clarity that I was afraid to offer. You asked point blank, "Is my wife dying?"

"Yes." I accepted it. If this news was crumpling me, how much was it crushing you?

It was better this way. Choosing end-of-life care for your wife meant that you could see her in person. A beautiful, albeit poignant, reunion, I imagined.


It was not until I saw you at her bedside that I realized just how poignant it would be. It was not until I saw you that I realized your wife would not get to see your face before she died. She would not get to hold your hand. Although neither of you had known it, she had already felt you kiss her for the last time.

It was not until I saw your necktie, your dress shoes, and the crisp lines in your freshly combed hair that I realized how touching it was that you still cared to show up in this way for your spouse, even after a lifetime together.

It was not until you asked me whether she was in pain, as she moaned, that I realized my job was not to walk you away from the fact that your wife was dying, but to help you understand this solemn symphony. But I had not been here before either, so I did not recognize the different tempos.

I remember, afterward, helping you take off your personal protective equipment, ensuring you did not also catch this virus. It seemed unfair that I got to be this close to you. I got to see your bare hands, your face without a shield, your button-up shirt beneath the yellow isolation gown.

I do not know what you will remember from that day. I do not know if you will remember me at all. I do not know if I helped or if I made things worse.

You have left an indelible imprint on me, though. And next time, I will recognize the music. 

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Competing interests
None declared



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