

## Caretaker

By Laura Hinton

I look up at my husband, who is awake in our bed in New York City. He is sitting on the bed's edge near the bathroom door. He is sitting strangely, crumpled over, holding an unusual pose.

*Have you had a bad dream?* I say—or want to say.

My husband gets up, as if trying to go to the bathroom. He then falls down. He repeats this action over and over. I am watching him in a sleepy haze. Through half-opened eyes, I look at him and ask: *What's wrong?*

My husband responds in a language I do not recognize—a garbled tongue. My husband speaks in a language that is neither his native French nor his perfect bi-lingual English. Partially asleep, I get up. I try to help my husband rise. He is leaning against me. Then his heavy dead-weight body falls on top of me. For a moment, I cannot breathe. My lungs feel momentarily crushed.

I wiggle out from under my husband's large, heavy body. Once again, I am helping him get up. I feel my ribs being bruised as he crushes me again and is lying on top of me. I creep out from the underside of him, again. I sit and stare at my husband's feet. His feet are drooping off the bed by the bathroom door. *His feet—clawed.* Suddenly, I recognize the helplessly curved shape of my stroke-victim mother's paralyzed hand in my husband's feet. Three months earlier, my mother had had a major stroke across the country. It had left her right hand useless.

*My husband's feet – the shape of my mother's right hand.*

Oh my god . . . Is my husband ... having a stroke, too?

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One peony and one iris are bursting on the day I go to bed and partially sleep through the night with my husband beside me.

My husband's white face is looking at me dazed in an emergency room.

He is dressed in a blue-checked gown with the backside fully open. His eyes are open. He can't speak a sentence.

A plastic bottle is attached to his bed, filled with yellow urine.

My husband speaks only nonsense but he knows my name.

People are leaning over my husband with tubes and machines and needles.

A blue flower in a window is overlooking an enormous outdoor machine.

A man is yelling wearing a blue suit, carrying a contraption that is my husband.

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I roll away from my husband to the phone next to the bed. I call 911. I say: *My husband might be having a stroke.* In two minutes, two NYPD officers in blue uniforms show up at our apartment building door.

These NYPD police officers arrive in the wee hours of this spring May night. They arrive well before the EMS personnel.

The officers sniff around. They appear to be looking for drugs. They look as if they want to arrest my husband and me. They seem to have no interest in getting my husband urgently to a nearby Manhattan hospital.

Our apartment becomes a potential NYPD crime scene while we wait for an ambulance. The officers stalk the premises. EMS paramedics have yet to appear. The cops demand my husband's driver's license. I am shaking like a leaf. I believe my husband might die and I am holding up his head. I tell them that my husband is recently out of the hospital and that he is a cardiac patient. I tell them I am afraid to leave my husband's side to look for a driver's license. The cops have no expression. They have no response. They appear to be automatons without emotions.

The NYPD officers order me to get my husband's driver's license.

I think I am going to shake out of my skin. Trembling, I leave my husband's head on an upright pillow. I am afraid he is going unconscious, so I think I have to keep his head upright. I don't know if this is the right thing to do. I feel I should do it anyway. Under police orders, I go to my husband's desk. I look for his wallet and driver's license. I cannot think clearly, I am scared my husband is going to die. The NYPD officers are now yelling at me to get my husband's driver's license.

I cannot find his driver's license! – my husband... might die!

Now I am standing near the bed in a white flowing nightgown and yelling this. The cops don't understand: my husband might die.

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Finally, the EMS arrives. The EMS are also two men. They themselves look as if they are on drugs – or possibly asleep. It is still early in the morning. The NYPD officers stand by formally, in the corner, forming hostile shapes.

The EMS men say they are taking my husband to the hospital. I tell them: *Take him to NYU Medical Center two blocks away. He was just released there. They have his records.*

The EMS men tell me they will take my husband to whatever hospital they choose.

I am arguing: *You have to take him to NYU!*

The other hospital in our neighborhood had nearly killed my husband last month. He had been taken to that other hospital when his heart stopped, and his internal defibrillator went off, like a lightening bolt knocking him unconscious to the floor. At this other hospital, my husband's computerized defibrillator records were not read correctly. He was soon discharged without care and allowed to walk home. Three hours later, he was back in the hospital. That second time he was taken to NYU Medical, where his condition was at least taken more seriously. I am seriously worried. I see I have no cooperation.

*We will take him where we want to take him,* say the EMS men.

*Take him to NYU,* I tell them firmly. *If you don't, and he dies, it will be on your head.*

The EMS men are loading my husband's dead-weight body into their van. My husband looks like a corpse. The EMS men now say: *OK, we will take him to NYU.*

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Dark dark -- I am alone in the still night on one of Manhattan's major streets.

Not a single car on the avenue.

Not a single cloud in the still-dark springtime sky.

I am in my nightgown, white and fluttering. I am the quiet of a normally grinding city, in the early-morning pale dark.

I am standing against a tenement wall, trying to prop myself up while my husband's prone body is wheeled into a white van. I am arguing with people who are supposed to help. Two NYPD officers stand nearby, stone statues, their faces turned away in this early-morning dark of dark.

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I am in a stark-white emergency room and it is early morning before the dawn.

I am told by a neurologist who appears at my husband's bedside: *Your husband has had a major stroke.*

My husband is soon moved to a rehab ward in an adjacent building of NYU hospital.

I am denied a chair in this rehab unit next to my ill husband.

I am told to get off the floor by a nurse when I sit down because I feel like passing out.

I am told that this unit is a good stroke rehab unit-- the best.

I am told that this unit is a terrible stroke rehab unit-- the worst.

I am told there is no better place in New York State.

I see feces at the bottom of my husband's bed, wrapped in a rag, in a plastic bag.

I am told of blood spurting from my husband's IV when nurses are not around.

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My husband is a very bad patient, who insists on using the bathroom himself instead of calling for assistance. Several times my husband gets up to use the bathroom alone. Several times my husband crashes to the ground.

My husband nearly breaks his leg—a leg that isn't even working.

One of my husband's out-of-town daughters-in-law, whom he never sees, shows up and tells the hospital staff that she is "his daughter." I do not know what the hospital staff means when they tell me that my husband's "daughter is here."

My husband's sons arrive from distant regions. They are standing in the rehab unit with their mother, my husband's ex-wife. Everyone is standing around, looking at my husband. The urine hangs from his bed. The IV above his head drips fluid. Nobody says anything when I enter the room. Then, they disappear.

The neurologist at my husband's bedside is critical of the other doctors who treated my husband at the same hospital. Those other doctors had removed my husband from his regular dose of blood-thinner medication. The neurologist tells me the cardiologists from his own hospital caused my husband's stroke.

I never see this neurologist again. He also disappears.

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A husband who will not do what the nurses tell him to do and tries to use the bathroom without assistance falls repeatedly on his ass.

Two angry social workers call me on the telephone daily.

They call me "the caretaker."

They tell me I have things to do.

They have Brooklyn accents and order me around.

They tell me I must meet with them.

They tell me I have to arrange this and that.

They tell me that there is paperwork to complete.

They do not ask me if I have a job or other demands in my life.

At one point, one of the social workers asks me on the telephone: *Where is your mother?*

I am a professional woman in my 50's. And I am supposed to have a mother. I tell them something that is true: *My mother had a stroke. She lives in Arizona.*

They call me Caretaker.

I am a Caretaker now.

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The head nurse is crying when I call to complain about the feces on the floor.

Me, crying, on the floor, crying with her, too.

Too many phone calls to answer, too many jobs to do.

Too many companies calling to sell my husband superfluous equipment.

Flowers that are dead on arrival from friends—which then have to be disposed of.

Bills that my husband has acquired that I don't know about in the mailbox—too many of them.

Adult step-children who arrive and do not talk and then leave with scarcely a trace.

I am told that I am a Caretaker now.

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I try to decorate the ugly rehab-unit room with silly pictures of the family dog. They look ridiculous on the barren gray wall.

One evening when the rehab ward is quiet, I sneak the dog herself into my husband's room. The dog licks my husband's face and then gets back into her carry-pouch. The dog doesn't seem to know that this is my husband.

My husband who is not a sports fan watches sports all day on his rehab ward television. My husband seems to have changed personalities entirely.

A relative sends my husband an iPod although he cannot use it. People send my husband cards although he cannot read them. I read these cards to my husband out loud. I start an internet site to update friends and relatives on his condition. I decorate the window with the cards – the window that overlooks the machine that reminds me we have become part of an institution called American Medicine.

I am a Caretaker now. I do the work of two people now—I take care of the professional and financial lives of two living adults, because one of them is unable to speak or walk or think.

I am exhausted. I am a Caretaker.

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Phone calls from various case workers give me jobs to do as if I had no other job, although I have one.

The doctor who is head of the rehab unit returns one phone call from me. He promises to call again the next day to update me on my husband's condition. Then, he disappears, too—on a two-week vacation.

There is very little information about my husband's condition from medical personnel. My husband's sons have come and gone. They do not communicate although I continue to email them regularly about my husband's condition.

My husband, a trained intellectual, cannot do anything but watch sports games on television.

My husband does not know anything is wrong with him.

When I tell my husband I am depressed about his condition, he tells me I have two little ringing balls in my head that go "clang clang clang." And I think he is right.

My husband gradually learns to string words together. I learn to understand my husband's language although it contains no nouns or verbs or syntax.

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I tour facilities outside of New York City hoping for better services for my husband.

I find no better facilities that have the rehabilitation and cardiac services my husband needs.

Suddenly, in the NYU Rehab Unit, my husband takes his first step.

I send an email to everyone: *He has taken a first step!*

Just as suddenly, I am informed by the rehab-unit staff that my husband is about to be "released"—not because he is well, but because he has taken one step, and the insurance company will possibly no longer pay the hospital.

I cannot imagine my very ill husband living at home. He has *only* taken one step!

I come to understand that "pre-authorized" in insurance lingo means nothing. I come to understand this is the American way of Medicine.

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Since my husband can barely walk and he cannot climb stairs, and since we live in a three-story walk-up tenement building in New York City, I make plans to take my husband to Upstate New York. I am told that he is about to be discharged from the rehab unit.

My husband will be discharged from the NYU Medical Center rehab unit because of American corporate insurance rules, not because of his true condition.

I have nightmares about my husband falling, and me, alone with him, not being able to pick him up.

One friend tells me she was a caretaker for a dying friend, and when her friend was dying, she had to drag him from room to room before he died.

I cannot imagine dragging my husband—although I begin to consider this as a real possibility. I plan and plan and I pack a lot of bags. I do not know how long we will be living in Upstate New York. My husband has now taken one step. But he is still severely disabled. The day my husband leaves the hospital, my husband is picked up—frail and sickly—he rides in a limousine with my son and the dog beside him. I drive our separate loaded-down car. We leave the city in a violent rainstorm.

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An unseen child is hanging a plastic bag out a school bus window over the FDR Drive to catch the rain.

The white clouds ignite over a blackened sky so as to imitate the presence of the Milky Way.

My husband is folding a brown blanket in the car beside my own.

My dog is spreading dog food on my husband's face in my dream.

People in the grocery store are looking at me as if I am strange and I do feel strange, and like

I'm living in a time warp.

A woman is telling me I am crazy and maybe I am.

I am a Caretaker now. I am a Caretaker now.

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I am buying a digital television set at a New Jersey super-store in the waning hours of the analogue age.

I am trying to buy a digital television that is not an analogue machine because my husband has had a major stroke, and that's a brain injury.

The superstore won't take my checks for the television and my credit card at the superstore won't work.

When I call the national bank to see why my credit card won't work, the bank seems to have shut down.

When finally I can purchase and then set up the digital television in Upstate New York for my husband, there is no signal.

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I am watching the hot-pink and golden-pink peonies spread their petal fans all over the grass in Upstate New York.

I am noticing how shoots of purple irises live in their bodies as if in imaginary flight.

I am noticing how hard it is to be alone with a brain-injured individual.

I am wondering why there are no butterflies in Upstate New York this year.

I am wondering when the fireflies will appear this year.

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I learn to simplify the most basic tasks. I learn to accept the arrivals of three different physical therapists, one speech therapist and one nurse, all of whom “stop by” our Upstate New York residence three times a week each—per their schedule and without appointments to give my husband therapies.

The therapists flow in and out of my house everyday. I have no life but that of a caretaker. To them, I am “the Caretaker.”

I am a Caretaker now.

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I learn to devote my days to my husband's welfare.

One day, the flood of therapists and nurse stops. I call the home health-care agency and learn that the insurance was suddenly cancelled—in error. I spent all day on the telephone, listen to each sides’ stories of blame. I resolve the insignificant differences between the company that is the home-care provider and the company that is the medical-insurance provider.

I am a Caretaker.

A therapist tells my adult son, who is distressed on my behalf: *Men are supposed to hire help if their wives get sick. Women are supposed to be the Caretakers and do all the work themselves.*

I am wondering why I never noticed this particular gender gap before.

My adult son becomes my only friend, an ally who considers the circumstances I am in. My husband’s friends do not visit or appear. My husband’s own family does not communicate or help out. My adult son visits Upstate New York when he is able. But I wonder what happened to all the people who were writing so many emails when my husband was in the hospital. Where are they now?

They know I am the Caretaker.

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Hearing a bird’s angry tirade from a tree.

Seeing a flying ant on the inside of an open parasol.

Registering the sound of a ghost plane whose trails I know but whose tracks are covered by time.

Worrying that a maple tree is losing leaves before the summer begins.



Hearing my husband speak his first name twice into a silver cell phone.

Knowing he is ill but not dying.

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It is one year later, and my husband starts to recognize that something terrible happened to him.

It is one year later. And just as my husband is beginning to gain awareness and recover from his stroke, my 32-year-old son dies in his sleep of undetected heart disease.

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