

Watching

By Thomas Schwarz

I was stranded by an ice storm while visiting my hospice patient, Leslie, at her hilltop home. After laying down a thick glaze everywhere the ice turned to snow. My car was parked at the bottom of her driveway. If I manhandled my car up the driveway to the road I'd still be several unplowed miles from the highway and a frightening hour's slide to home. But the weather aside, Leslie was leaving soon, "crossing the river" as my colleagues and I call it. I'd stay with her until the end.

She lay curled on the leather couch like a sleeping cat. Her failing liver had turned her hair to straw months ago, her skin was slightly less yellow than the daffodil hue of her sclera. She hadn't eaten anything in a week, the constant drip of the intravenous narcotics her only sustenance, such as it was. It barely kept her pain at bay. Occasionally I'd moisten her lips with lemon-glycerin swabs so her husband would feel she was comfortable behind her cracked lips. I knew it wouldn't slake her thirst. A week earlier, when she was still responsive, I asked her if she wanted anything to drink. "A beer," she croaked.

Leslie's husband sat in his recliner near her head. He looked at her with watery blue eyes that told everything but betrayed nothing. Whenever I visited to refill her narcotic pump he mumbled hello and showed me the same stiff smile. A lifetime of loving grown wordless. Their two adult sons filled the love seat near her feet. They were even quieter, if that was possible, never saying hello or goodbye, but sometimes shaking my hand as I left. Today no one spoke or moved except to fold or unfold their arms, as they grew numb or restless. On the opposite side of the room a basketball game played on a TV the size of a ping-pong table, the sound turned off. The heat ticked the baseboards at the room's edges. Outside the wind rose and fell, sleet pelting the picture window angrily, hiding the road beneath its deepening whiteness. A small-computerized CADD pump whirred, keeping a tiny stream of dope dripping into her vein. Her breathing was erratic, shallow, sometimes absent for seconds that seemed like hours. I was mesmerized. Minute sounds in the room became a clock by which we all measured her life running out. Her shoulder rose and fell unevenly. She winced weakly, frightened. I could not think of something meaningful to do. I sat apart, the spook that sits by the door. I watched.

They watched her closely, too, but not continuously. They took turns looking away, their gaze drawn occasionally to the game. A minute, maybe two, staring at the TV and then they looked back at her. A while later, they'd look away from Leslie again, back at the game. How could they do that? I wondered, at first with wonder then with growing anger. She had hours, maybe only minutes left, how could they look away for even that short a time? The person they loved was leaving soon; what if they missed it? Was a minute-by-minute game update about a faceless, completely silent athletic contest more important than being present for the last minutes of your greatest love? Look away, and she could be gone while the snap is

fumbled, while the 3-pointer misses the buzzer. Then you've missed something *really* important!

I kept watch, stone-faced, angry, and resentful on her behalf of their shallow, misplaced attentions. I simmered, but they never knew. Then again, neither did Linda. From her appearance she had, as I gently describe to grieving families, one foot in this world and the other in the next. She was beyond pain, unaware of the syncopated rise and fall of her chest and abdomen as her breathing slowed to an abnormal rhythm. Why should I care about their faltering attention to their wife and mother? Did my emotions improve my care or salve her occasional restlessness?

But maybe watching her slip away took an unimaginable toll on them. Maybe three minutes away from her, watching the game, was necessary beyond my understanding. Maybe one more minute contemplating her drawn, half-mummified face would have crushed them. Maybe the outline of her crumpled body beneath the marriage quilt they shared for 30 years was seared on his retinas. Maybe they heard her raspy breath even in their shallow sleep while they kept vigil. Maybe there is a limit to how long you can watch a loved one die. Maybe you have to look away, eventually.

Hours later, after she'd gone, I slowly drove home through the deep whiteness. I could still hear her pump whirring, the ice-filled wind pelting the windows, her tortuous breathing, the silence of the game.

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