

Waiting for His Wife

by Nathaniel Tower

"Where's my wife?" he asked for the third time in the last five minutes.

"Dad, I already told you about your wife. She's not coming." The son held the man's brittle hand with a firm gentleness.

"Why," -he coughed twice -"not?"

The son looked at the grandson with pleading eyes. *Do you want to try to tell him*, the eyes asked through tears.

I wouldn't know what to say, the grandson's eyes responded.

Three more coughs. The stench of crap was starting to overwhelm all but the grandfather. The son pushed the red button again.

"Where's the damned nurse?" he cried out, expressing his father's pain through his words.

Three minutes passed silently. "Where's my wife?" he asked again.

The man had been so handsome in his younger days. Even in his older days, he had been a fine specimen of man. His body had been strong and thick. His skin had been tan and smooth. His hair had been full. None of that was true anymore.

The body was wasting away. At the current rate, he would be a skeleton in a week. The multiple myeloma, accompanied by the kidney failure, had been too much for any single human to overcome, no matter how strong that single human may have been, no matter how many torturous days he had fought in some war sixty years ago. He had given up. He had come here to die.

All he wanted was his wife at his side.

"Dad." the son began to explain before trailing off. There was no point. He would never understand that his wife had suffered from a stroke two nights ago and was now in a permanent coma at a different hospital until her death.

She had been strong and faithful to the very end, spending countless hours beside his bedside, desperately trying everything to get him to eat, to get him to fight, to get him to live. Perhaps the stroke was her own way of giving up.

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The son couldn't take the smell anymore. He stormed out of the room, leaving the grandson alone with the grandfather. In the hallway, he found a nurse drinking coffee. "How long does my father have to soak in his own waste before you come clean him up?"

The nurse seemed offended. "Sir, we're short-staffed today. It's Labor Day weekend. We'll get to your father when we can."

"How's the coffee?" he asked smugly. "When you're finished with your pick-me-up, do you think that maybe you could come treat my father like a human so he can die a somewhat dignified death?"

The nurse slammed her coffee down on a countertop and went to find some help. The father returned to the room, the grandson still sitting there staring at the grandfather. The grandson's eyes were dry. He returned just in time to hear the man say, "Where's my wife?"

He couldn't take this anymore either. "She's dying, Dad. She's in a coma and she's dying. She's never coming back. She's dying." His tears ran freely down his swollen red cheeks.

The grandfather stared at him blankly, ready to open his mouth and ask again, but something about the way his son looked at him made him close it. When the nurse came in, not the same nurse that he had verbally assaulted in the hall, the son hid the tears. The grandson still had not cried.

When he saw the nurse, the grandfather asked her, "Where's my wife?"

She looked at the son and grandson and shrugged. "Just try to relax, Mr. Venebal." she said as she lifted him and began the cleansing process. "Where's my wife?" he muttered almost inaudibly, his face buried in the pillow as she cleaned his waste from underneath him. The pillow couldn't tell him either.

No matter how many times the words were said, no one could tell him. His brain had deteriorated beyond comprehension. All he comprehended at this point was that his wife was supposed to be there but wasn't. "Where's my wife?" he asked again when the nurse turned him back over.

"Close your eyes," she said. He did. She took his hand. "I'm right here," she said to him. "I have to say goodbye now, though. I'll meet you in heaven."

The grandfather smiled. The nurse squeezed his hand and left. The son cried. The grandson watched, unable to cry. The grandfather waited in the bed to die. The son and grandson waited for that as well.

Within a week, they had both died. At the military burial, the horn playing "Taps" and the three-gun salute made the grandson cry.

But the thought of the husband and wife together in heaven free of sickness, made the son smile.

