

One of Her Good Nights

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At night, Elizabeth Richard would often hold her husband's hand when he was eating and sometimes she would even feed him with the spoon, but there were occasions, she called these his good nights, when he was able to manage on his own. She could tell by the shaky way Tom passed his hand over the top of his head, straightening what little was left of his thin brown hair, that this would not be one of those.

Regis was hounding another contestant into second guessing himself on TV, while Tom arched the spoon up and placed it into his mouth, took it out, and carefully moved his jaw. It was only soup, what his doctors advised to keep his mouth-work minimal. Soup, what he had eaten little other than since his Parkinson's reached this stage of advancement. But soup was still a challenge, enough to keep them both busy.

There had been a time when they sat in the dining room and ate steak for dinner, talking, when she and Tom would never have watched a program like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, but now there was a real need for voices in their small house, and they'd become less choosy. Especially at night, when the house was quietest, they treated the TV as if it were a

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long-lost friend, sitting rapt in front of it, letting it make their conversation.

When the doorbell rang, the next potential millionaire was consulting with his brother in Illinois over which US state had the most water area in lakes. Elizabeth looked at Tom, who peered up at her through his spiky eyebrows. He rattled his spoon against the side of his bowl as the doorbell rang again.

She slid her feet into her slippers, and as they sat and listened for it to come once more, the brother in Illinois told his ideas about Minnesota versus, possibly, Maine. When the doorbell rang for a third time, she said, “I’ll just get it and find out then.”

She got up and, smoothing out her shorts and checking the pins in her hair, crossed in front of the couch, out of the living room, and passed through the front hall to the door. Through the spy hole she could see AdamAdamAdamAdam, their paperboy, standing on the porch. He was facing away from her, with his shoulders hunched, but she could recognize his mackinaw and hat as the garments she had seen hanging out of the car that came down their street early in the morning. She was usually awake to hear the approaching sound of the papers slapping onto porches, and, by the time he was to their house, she was often looking down into the street from Tom’s study to see the familiar arm protrude from the window and

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fling its delivery.

She opened the door and he turned around, as if startled. He dropped his hands behind his back and made an odd face, as if he'd just swallowed something whole. Then he coughed and the smoke came out of his mouth. "Sorry," he said, stooping to brush out his cigarette against their steps. "I didn't realize you were home."

Elizabeth watched him stand up to his full height before she addressed him. "This must be about your Christmas bonus, is that right?"

Adam took his hat off and held it in both hands in front of his chest. "Yes, it is, ma'am."

Always the same thing around this time of year. Very much more of the same. "Well come inside," she said. "Come in and sit while I write you out a check."

He took off his coat and hung it on the rack inside the door, then bent down and unlaced his boots. She noticed it when he looked at her legs once, then twice, while he was crouched down on the floor. This did not bother her: it actually had the opposite effect, made her feel better, a little, as if the work she did on the stairclimber hadn't all gone for nothing.

She even found herself humming slightly as she led Adam into the living room and introduced him to her husband. She saw how Tom did his

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best to look up at the boy and offered his feeble hand. Adam took the hand as if afraid he might break it and called Tom, “Mr. Richard.”

Still facing his tray, Tom looked up at Adam through his eyebrows. He said, “How are you?”

“I’m fine, sir. Thank you.”

She went to the study to look for her checkbook, listening to hear if there were voices coming from the living room. She sat down at the desk and opened the drawer. That was when she first heard Tom talking softly, below the sounds of the television. He had such a hard time forming words, making the sounds with his mouth, that those who weren’t used to listening closely often didn’t understand him. Still, she was glad now that someone new was there to talk with her husband, and she allowed herself to linger over her checkbook.

Even before Regis Philbin, it seemed that they had run out of things to say. Already in their fifties when they married, everything had been wonderful getting to know one another and relearning how to live with another person, for a while, but after the first few years, they had been forced into the fight against Tom’s disease that had robbed them of so many pleasures.

She could still hear Regis talking and wished she had turned off the

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volume, or the set altogether, before she had left them alone. She decided to go and turn off the set, but as she came into the living room, she stopped, remaining in the doorframe where they couldn't see her.

Adam was saying how he'd studied History in college, how he had gone to Spain for part of a summer, where a professor of his connected him with a two-week program in Madrid, after which he'd traveled around the country on a train pass. This seemed to excite Tom. He hadn't sat up as straight in a while and he seemed to make every effort to look at the boy, to see into his eyes. Elizabeth wondered if they'd talked to each other before.

“How did you like Barcelona?” Tom said.

The boy was quiet when Tom spoke, careful not to talk over him. He leaned down to see Tom's eyes, to bring his ear closer to Tom's mouth, and nodded when he understood.

“It was good,” Adam said. “It's not my favorite city, but I love some things about it, especially the architecture by Gaudi.”

“Spain must have changed,” Tom said. “When I was there it was not a nice country. They stopped us in Figueras and we had to spend some time in prison before we could move on.”

“You said it's changed?”

Tom spoke again, but this time his mumbling sounded worse. When he spoke, his lips didn't get as far as he wanted; they got in the way, cut him off. He had to just let words go, push them out with his neck, where most of his sounds were formed, and hope it made sense. Especially his "S's"—they all fell out flat, empty lisps.

"They put us in prison," Tom said. Even with everything, he really wanted to talk—she could see this—and he wouldn't settle for anything about the weather, anything common; he was trying to explain to Adam about a trip to Europe he'd taken some sixty years ago. "We were trying to drive an ambulance to Portugal and they held us up in Figueras," he mumbled.

"Prison?" Adam saw her and looked to her, as if for help. She tried to act as if she were just watching Regis—to keep the illusion that they were alone—but she couldn't help taking the remote off the coffee table and muting the TV. She sat down on the couch, between Adam and the TV.

"When I was nineteen," Tom said again, "I drove an ambulance through France and Spain to Portugal." She watched Tom, hoping to encourage Adam to keep listening, but noticed the way he stared at Tom's mouth when he spoke.

"To Portugal?" Adam asked. "From where?"

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“From Paris, where I was living. When I was your age I studied there. I met people who volunteered in Portugal. They were driving an ambulance down. We would drive the ambulance in Portugal.”

“What year was this?”

Tom stopped and made a noise in his throat, a little thing he did when he was thinking. “I think it was 1930’s. Thirty-seven.”

“Wow,” Adam said. “That’s wow. Like Hemingway times.”

“But they stopped us in Figueras,” Tom said. Adam made a face, and when he asked again what Tom had said, Tom repeated himself. “In Spain,” he said, “they put us in prison. In Figueras.”

“Prison,” Adam said. “In 1937. In Figueras.” Elizabeth could see how hard this was, wondered why Tom couldn’t be satisfied with talking about the weather, something more simple: like sports, or a book even. Elizabeth checked the clock on the top of the piano: there was just over fifteen minutes left in Millionaire.

In a deep way, Elizabeth Richard had become tired with being the only one for Tom to talk to. Beyond just its sound, the game show was something she allowed herself because she was tired of acting as Tom’s interpreter when he tried to talk about things that were beyond what he could communicate, tired of being the only one he talked to, and of Tom

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expecting her to always make the extra effort necessary to understand him. She knew he had no other choice, but still, she was tired. Now she watched as Adam continued to glance at her quizzically, but she pretended she wasn't there. She just wanted the two of them to go on talking. Maybe, she considered, if they did then Tom would learn something about how little he could communicate and how hard this was for her. Maybe he would realize not to start long conversations about sixty year-old subjects with their paper boy.

“Why would they put you in prison?” Adam asked.

Tom's head had begun to droop; he was facing his bowl again. “They said they had to check our papers. Then, when they came back, they took us to the jail. There was a British woman with us, and they let her go. She returned to France. But the others and I stayed.”

Adam watched and nodded.

“Franco held the power then and he could have been suppressing our aid to Portugal. But we didn't know it.” Tom's face strained when he spoke, then he dragged his bent hand across his face, wiping his mouth with the side of his first finger. The room became quiet. Outside, the winter wind blew hard against the house, and a branch scratched at a kitchen window.

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As soon as Elizabeth noticed Adam watching the TV, she turned it off. He looked at her for a moment, maybe even got ready to say something, but then she turned to Tom. He appeared startled that she had done this, and he looked at her without speaking. He leaned back so that he could see her, so she could see his eyes. She saw nothing special in them, just Tom, her husband, as present and alive as he'd always been, his expression as normal as if he'd just finished his soup.

“Wait,” Adam said, “But I’m still not sure why you were going to Portugal,” and Tom started answering him again, nodding his head as he spoke. He told Adam about his studying poetry on a leave from Harvard in Paris for a year, and about Franco and the Spanish Civil War, the Portuguese uninvolvedness, and the types of people you could meet in those days, for whom peace was so important. He told Adam how the others had the ambulance, but that they needed a driver. “And, at the time,” he said, “Peace seemed more important than poetry.”

Adam had leaned closer to listen, bending down to Tom’s face. His expression was one that Elizabeth Richard had not seen in some time: it was not the look of her husband’s doctor, or that of the day-nurse who gave him his baths: Adam tilted his head as if to bring his ear closer to a precious sound, something he cared about hearing, and when he nodded it was a

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simple acknowledgement of one person understanding another.

She looked at the two of them and opened her mouth to speak, then shut it for fear of intruding. They looked so right, almost like two normal people chatting. “Tom’s done some very interesting things over the years,” she said, and then, surprised at the sound of her own voice, its loudness and clarity, she stopped. They each looked at her, as if they hadn’t expected her to speak then, and she could hear the wind outside in the silence. She remembered how quiet their house could be. “I’m sorry,” she said. “The two of you were talking.”

Adam smiled at her. “It’s some story he’s telling. I’ve read about Paris in those days, but I never knew anyone who was there.”

Elizabeth studied the boy: he was young and handsome, a strong college student who had lots of other places he could be. But he was here, listening to her husband. She touched his shoulder. “Let me show you something,” she said. She led him to the piano in the front of the room. “Tom did this,” she said, pointing to a green and yellow painting. “It’s the last one he did before he lost the motor control in his hands.”

“I hadn’t known he was an artist.”

“He used to paint,” she said, “beautifully.”

Tom remained hunched over his tray, looking down into the soup that

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would now be cold in its bowl. Some of his hair was sticking straight out from his head, and his lower lip worked itself under his upper, moving like a part on a machine. She watched him move his finger across his chin, just below his lip.

“That’s a prison camp, right?” Adam said. “It’s not Spain, is it?”

“It’s a camp in Germany where Tom was for two years during World War II,” she said.

In the painting, a block of men wearing blue-green coveralls stood handcuffed together outside of a building under a yellow sky, surrounded by black-clad guards. They filled the center of the canvas, holding themselves erect with slumped shoulders. There had always been something about the painting, the color of the sky or the prisoners’ clothes, perhaps the way they held themselves, that was not altogether dark.

Adam studied the painting with wide eyes. “It’s amazing,” he said.

“It was a Nazi work camp,” she said. “But Tom says it wasn’t always bad. It wasn’t a death camp. No one died there.”

Despite its subject, the painting held beauty. Perhaps the colors are what save it from being sad, she thought. The yellow of the sky held optimism and real hope: it wasn’t falling on the captives, it was suspended above them, holding itself up like an attainable goal, a reassurance.

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“Tom met other Americans there,” she said. “Canadians, French, even British. The Germans worked them all hard, he says, but they weren’t cruel.”

Tom sat sideways in his chair, his head cocked to one side, watching them. His face was calmer, and his lip seemed still. He hunched over and forward, facing down, but he had moved the soup bowl onto the chair beside him.

“Why was he in Europe?” Adam asked.

“He went to Canada and joined the Canadian Army before the US involvement,” she said. “He actually defected to fight for what he believed in.”

“Peace was more important than poetry,” Adam said. He reached toward the painting, as if to touch it, but stopped short. “I never knew anyone who could paint like this.”

She heard Tom say, “That’s enough about me now,” though he’d become even harder to understand. When she turned to him, he motioned with his hand for them to return to the couch.

Adam looked at his watch. “I should get going,” he said. He went over to Tom and thanked him, shaking the small twisted hand between both of his own. “Thanks for the stories,” he said. “Spain is different now.

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The people are friendly.”

Tom nodded. “I hope so.”

Elizabeth followed Adam out of the living room and into the front hall, where he stooped to put his boots on. As he did, she rushed back into the study and grabbed her checkbook. She tore off the check she’d written and took forty dollars out of her wallet, stuffed them both into a plain white envelope.

“Thanks for showing me that painting,” Adam said, as she returned to the hall. She handed him the envelope and opened the door, pretending not to notice the way he looked at her legs again. When outside, he turned and thanked her, and she thanked him then closed the door. She watched him through the window as he folded the envelope, tucked it into the pocket of his jacket, and took out his package of cigarettes. He lit one and walked back to his car.

She locked the door then and turned off the porch light. The hall was dark. She crossed back to the living room, where Tom sat in his chair, his hands resting on the tray-table. She walked to the front of the room and looked at the painting one last time before turning off the lamp by the piano. She took Tom’s bowl into the kitchen and washed it, then set it in the rack to dry. She considered sitting down in the kitchen, at the table by herself—

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where she usually collected her thoughts—but went back to the living room and Tom. When she sat down next to her husband and put her arm around him, she noticed his hair again and took the opportunity to smooth it down along the back of his skull, rubbing her hand over the curve of his back when she had done.

“Are you ready to go up?” she asked.

He nodded.

She took his arm and lifted him partly, waiting for his own legs to support him and do the rest of the job. As she helped him to stand, she reached into the hall for his walker and brought it around to stand next to him. He gripped the gray plastic handles intently, bowed over, and began his shuffle into the hall. She followed. When he had reached the bottom of the stairs, he turned and she helped him sit back into his lift-chair, the device they had had installed to carry him up to their second floor, and then she belted him in. When he nodded his readiness, she started the machine. It hummed and clicked as it carried him slowly up the stairs, on a diagonal against the wall where they had once had a banister. When it had clicked its way to the top, one movement at a time, he smiled down at her and she realized that she had just watched him, without moving, and that this was not something she usually did. At the top of the stairs he waited for her to

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come help him into his wheelchair. She shut off the rest of the downstairs lights and made sure the door was locked again before coming up.

“Daydreaming?” he asked, as she followed him up. She laughed and, bending down to lift him, wrapped his arms around her neck. She felt his breath against her face as she had when they were first married, dancing together at The Plaza on their wedding night. They had eloped, but done it in style. She remembered his crisp black tuxedo and the way his cummerbund stretched across his thin waist. He was a good dancer then and they had danced as if they wore slippers of air. She’d never felt so romantic.

Now she pulled him close to her and squeezed her arms around his back, pressing his face into her neck. His stubble scratched her cheek and she remembered that tomorrow she would have to shave him. But she could smell his old smell, the same him underneath the medications and the old clothes, and she liked that. “Ready?” she said.

“Yes.”

She held her breath and lifted, his thin form pressing tight against her as she turned and then, bending at her knees, settled him down into his wheelchair. It always amazed her how light his body had become, that his limbs were so frail now. Though caring for him and lifting him had never

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been chores she'd expected, she had grown to enjoy the difference the work made in her arms, the methods of care that she'd learned from his doctors, the nurse.

“Thank you,” he said. He was always grateful.

With the electric wheelchair, he moved himself into the bathroom, where she squeezed toothpaste onto his toothbrush. He picked it up himself and brushed his teeth. When he was done, he set it back on the edge of the sink and leaned forward to spit. She rinsed out the basin and handed him a glass of water. He drank some and spit into the basin again. She wet his washcloth for him with warm water, waiting until it got to be the right temperature before adding soap. He washed his face and around his neck, and then, after she unbuttoned his shirt, under his arms. Then, as he sat next to her, watching, she filled the sink and washed her own face. Early on, when they first started using the bathroom together, he had sometimes whistled, but now he could only manage a hum. Tonight it was Mahler's second symphony that he began as she washed her face and took down her hair.

When she had finished her ablutions, she wheeled him into the bedroom and folded back the blankets before helping him change into his nightclothes. Lifting him now, she felt his cheek against hers and the

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delicate vibration of his face from his humming, but she also felt her husband turn his face just slightly to kiss her. “Thank you,” she said and when she settled him down onto the mattress, she made sure he was comfortable and fitted the blankets around him before she went around to her side, changed into her nightgown, turned off the lights, and climbed in.

In the darkness, she felt for Tom beneath the sheets with her hands as she slid over toward him. She found his hand and squeezed it lightly.

“Mahler,” she whispered. “Mahler’s second.”

Still humming, Tom squeezed her hand in return. She felt his other hand take her wrist.

“Thank you for the accompaniment,” she told him.

She took her husband in her arms then and, making sure he had enough room to breathe, she kissed him on the lips. She held his thin, weakened body, and felt his lungs fill part-way with air and then empty. She felt his heart beating steadily inside of him, a pounding organ inside his chest like anybody else’s, and she felt an immeasurable joy spreading through her, knowing that the man she loved was still alive.