

It is finally quiet, and I am glad.

I have felt so exposed all day. Relatives in and out, lingering longer than they needed to. Certainly longer than I wanted them to. Awkward silences. I asked the nurse to shoo them all away.

Let me have some peace. Let it happen quickly, while no one is gawking at me. It's mine. It's personal. It's private.

I know they are still about the place somewhere. I hear them whisper and shuffle by. I hear them sniffle and console. But here, it is dark and still, thankfully. I can't help them; they must do that for themselves. I can only think of my needs now. I do not even fear it; I just wish for the conclusion.

They have played their parts all day, each one true to character. My daughter has assumed the role of matriarch. Managing the household that is the family. But she does not relish it. Directing. Nurturing. Deciding. She wants to be able to decide for me too, but she cannot make this call. And at the same time, she is glad that the decision is not hers. Our hands-off relationship continues, even now. She can only tend to the others at this moment.

My older son, the stoic. Voiceless. Always a man of few words. Even now, he has no comment. He is merely present and waiting.

My youngest son, the baby. My happy-go-lucky child. Always the life of the party. He gives me and the others encouragement; he expects that everything will turn out all right. It always does in his world. He did not inherit his mother's pessimist gene.

My oldest granddaughter, the comedian. Tries to offer comic relief. A witty remark here or there. She hides behind the clown's disguise. She is a strong woman, but her strength comes from denying what she and everyone else truly know to be inevitable. She talks of the two of us playing Scrabble together, *when I recover*. Laughable.

My younger granddaughter, the drama queen. She puts on quite a show. Overacting. Wailing inconsolably. It is, of course, all about her. She drains the energy out of the room. Someone please draw the curtain.

Yet another granddaughter, the bashful one. Reserved. She offers a sheepish smile and averts her eyes. She prefers not to be seen, much like I do.

The great grandchildren, teenagers and younger. They wring their hands with the discomfort. Or they busy their minds with electronic distractions. It is so far removed from their reality. They are, after all, still immortal. Why do their parents bring them here? Let them be young, let them pretend that life goes on forever. Let them fidget somewhere else.

The others who pass through, intruders. Were we really so close in life that they feel they are entitled to see me in this condition? If they really knew me so well, they would realize that I do not want them here now. I wish to release them from their perceived obligation. I wish to give them leave. I wish to take my leave without audience.

The breaths are coming slowly, deliberate. I wonder if I will take another. And then I do. I wonder again if I will take another. This time the wait seems longer. Protracted. I draw another. I wait. I believe it is nighttime. I cannot open my eyes. I sense that things are going on around me, but I am uncertain. I strain my ears to hear. Where has all the clamor of the day gone? Is that

my daughter giving the nurse some instructions? Is that my son rallying the others? Is that my granddaughter telling a joke?

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