



Old Man
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"13, down: a short, pithy statement of a truth or doctrine, a maxim." Julian reached for his mug, drank a sip of his warm cocoa and went back to his crossword puzzle. The sweet taste of marshmallow imbued in the liquid revived in him happy memories he thought he had forgotten. He also liked the brown lazy-boy he was sitting in, it was his father's chair and it had been given to him when he had moved out to college. Even after nearly a century of wear, it was still sturdy and comfortable. It made him feel safe, it made him feel like maybe Martha would walk through that living room door and send him a kiss from afar like she used to do when she was still alive. He would catch the kiss and keep it in his pocket for later use. It was a ritual they did to escape the mundanity of years of romantic relationship. Simple rituals often remind us best of true feelings. It alleviates the need to express the full load every time.

Since her Alzheimer's hit, he had thought of his wife as being essentially dead. A small handful of recollections, completely devoid of cohesion, in barely functional biomachinery. Her soul had long gone this vessel and reached a place he'll be bound to join eventually. So when she died last year, Julian wasn't affected as much as he had expected it. His grief had already been fully spent during the final three years, when the disease had taken full control. He had already achieved the post-Martha period. All he had to do now was drink his cocoa and wait for the cold voice of Death telling him the final train was at the station.

It wasn't all that bad, he thought as he wrote 'APHORISM' carefully down the 13th column. He had a nice retirement fund, and his kids and their families still bothered to show up from time to time. Of course, they had been coming more often during the funeral time, inviting guests over, etc. All that was behind them now. Society and its demands restored everything to balance. As if she wasn't even gone. As if her death was only momentarily painful and Society expected the grieving family to forget about the ghastly event and return to their previous life, where Death wasn't lurking around every corner, waiting to feed on them. Everything was back as if Martha had never died, like she was simply gone to a country with no cellphones or email. She'll be back eventually, or we'll go meet her. Either way, there is no way that she is really gone, it would be too cruel. Society could not function if this amount of cruelty was always present in our minds. It was better to stay in denial, hope for God.

The phone rang suddenly, destroying his hopes for a calm day in his recliner. Julian's small dachshund, Pogo, barked loudly at the phone as Julian walked slowly to the kitchen counter and lifted the receiver.

"Cams Residence, how can I help you?"

"Hey dad, it's Kylee," said his daughter on the line.

"Hey pumpkin, how are you?"

As he spoke, he took a plate of lasagna in the fridge and put it in the microwave. He set two minutes and pressed 'cook'.

"I'm good, very good actually. Christian just got a promotion at work!"

"Oh honey, that's wonderful! As far as architects go, Christian seems to be a strong—"

The receiver slipped from his hands, hit the counter and fell on the floor, breaking itself in half. Curiously, his daughter's voice still went through the earpiece, yelling 'Hello? Dad?' worriedly, repeatedly. He looked at the floor and wondered why the phone slipped. He watched the paved floor reach his face at great speed, felt the pain run through his nose, his mouth and his eyes, follow the path to his brain. He stopped feeling much of anything when his eyes suddenly closed. His thoughts flowed away from his mind as he tried fruitlessly to grab them, to hold on to them. The smell of the heating lasagna struck fiercely, it crept through his mind, leaving a giant void behind. He wondered if he was going to see Martha soon.

A white coat hovered near his eyes when he opened them. He didn't remember having any white coats in the kitchen. Martha used to wear a white apron when she would cook. He heard the microwave beep and he wondered if he had only been out for two minutes. He felt he couldn't muster the energy to lift his hands or his head. He tried speaking to himself, to get some action going, perhaps pushing the rest to work.

"The... The microwave, I have to open the door to the microwave."

“The microwave, sir?”

He had not expected to hear another voice. He had thought he was alone in his kitchen. He looked up and followed the white coat with his eyes to see a young man, smiling at him. Why was there a man in a white coat in his kitchen? And, come to think of it, why did his kitchen smell so much like a hospital?

He looked to his right and saw the scrolling, jagged edges of a heart-beat monitor, beeping with constant rhythm. He wondered what the chances were that it had sounded exactly like his microwave.

“Why am I in a hospital?”

“Your daughter heard your fall while she was talking to you on the phone. She called an ambulance and they arrived in time to revive you. You were extremely lucky, Mr. Cams. If she hadn't been talking to you, you wouldn't be here talking to me.” The doctor smiled at the old man, trying to make him comfortable.

It was hard for Julian to wrap his head around this new development.

“Okay, sure. But what exactly happened to me?”

“You had a brain aneurysm, sir. Thankfully, you did not sustain any damages. We believe the clot is still flowing in your veins. We are trying to locate it so we can remove it.”

The man pressed some buttons on machines hooked to Julian and excused himself. A brain aneurysm. Of all the things he had expected to die of, this wasn't really on top of the list. He had a healthy amount of cholesterol and still exercised regularly. But anything can happen in this world, right?

The only thing he remembered from the experience was thinking about Martha, the last thought he remembered having before the hole in his memory was Martha. It was also the first thought when he woke up. If only Martha had been there, it wouldn't be so painful. For half a second, not even the time to fully develop into a full fledged thought, he felt a twinge of regret. He did not die. He was not able to finally reach his dead wife. He could not stop the loneliness.

A nurse came in with a tray of food which she put down on a counter and wheeled in front of him. Two spoons of salad, two bites of spaghetti and a finger of pudding. The tray seemed extremely big for such a small portion of food. It seemed that for the hospital staff, being old meant much the same thing as being a child when it came to food portions.

“How are we feeling today, Mr. Cams?”

It was always the first thing they asked him when a nurse or a doctor came into his room. No matter what he had, no matter what they were sent in there to do. It was all part of the ritual. Meanings conveyed to words by sociological evolution. It didn't matter what the words meant on their own, the formalized sentence meant so much more.

“I don't know, how are we doing? Planet's full of creeps, I'm stuck in a hospital bed and you're so overloaded with patients, I'm sure you probably don't have enough time to fetch me another pillow.”

Julian smiled at the nurse. She smiled back.

“Phew, Mr. Cams. If only I was twenty years older!”

“Child, if only I was twenty years younger, and you were into older men!”

She laughed and patted him on the leg.

“Don't worry about a thing, Mr. Cams. I'll bring that pillow along in a minute.”

“Thank you, love. And I'll try and chow down this mountain of a lunch. I'd probably give my left leg for some real juicy beef right now.”

When she had left the room, Julian turned on the television. He zapped through the channels, watching tidbits of shows here and there, but soon grew bored. He threw the soft hospital sheets on top of him, reclined the bed back and took take a nap.

He awoke again to find a white coat floating in front of his eyes. It seemed that this doctor always waited for the second he was asleep to come and do his tests. Julian coughed lightly to subtly indicate to the doctor that he was awake.

“Oh, good morning Mr. Cams.”

“And a good morning to you, Doctor.”

“We have some news about your condition that I think we should discuss.”

“Oh?”

“I'm not really sure how to say this. You have an errant clot in your bloodstream. We have located it, but it is lodged deeply into your brain. There are passages around it for the blood to stream past, but we don't know when it could be knocked loose again. You could have five minutes to live, or you could have a year. Given its shape and composition, I doubt you could have more than that.”

“Oh.”

He wasn't sure how to react to this. In a sense, it wouldn't change much of the way he was living until now. Except that now he had a final limit. One year. One year and the wait will be over. One year until he reached Martha. A sigh of relief exhaled from his lips as he felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. He looked at the doctor, but saw that he wasn't finished yet.

“There is however, an alternative.”

“An alternative?”

“Yes, we can go inside the brain and remove the blood clot. If the operation is successful, you would win 10, 15 years with this procedure.”

“And if it's not successful?”

The doctor coughed slightly and continued nervously.

“It appears that the clot stands in the Long Term Memory Area, which could take some damage from the operation. You could lose some memories as a result.”

His memories. He could start losing his memories, just like Martha did. Odd how sometimes the world feels so small.

“How much could I expect to lose?”

“It is hard to say, memory is a tricky area, and we'll have to see how it goes along, I'm afraid. But at least you'd be alive, right?”

Nothing in his life could possibly have prepared him for a situation like this. A simple dilemma with a complex outcome. Live to a maximum of one year, keeping Martha close to his heart until he dies, perhaps then forever, or keep on living. He would forget the past and focus on the only outcome left for him: death and all its weight. It would feel as if Martha was gone completely, a third death he could not bear. He needed Martha's strength to endure his loneliness. He could not have the operation. He could not kill Martha again.

“At least I'd be alive... without Martha.”

“Plato once said 'Man is a prisoner who has no right to open the door of his prison and run away. A man should wait, and not take his own life until God summons him.' The problem with this line of reasoning,” Julian said, sitting on a bench in the hospital's courtyard, “is in the nature of God's summoning.”

Damian turned away from his grandfather and lit his cigarette inside his black leather jacket to stop the mild wind from extinguishing the lighter's flame. He wore a black t-shirt with large white letters marking 'Your mom is in my band.'

“What are you on about, Julian?”

In an effort to get closer to their children, Damian's parents had tried keeping them on a first-name basis with family. Calling them Grandpa, Grandma, Uncle and Aunt was a sign of distance and his parents wanted to change that for their children. It eventually only led to contempt towards people in their family. When you feel you're equal to someone when you're five years old, sometimes you'll feel

that you're better than them once you get older, at least that's how his parents rationalized it in their mind.

"Do you enjoy smoking your cigarettes, Damian?"

He asked this without a hint of criticism, as if he had asked if he liked a particular song or movie.

"I guess. Why do you ask? Haven't you ever smoked?"

Julian got up from the bench and walked a few steps away from Damian, watching a young couple playing with their dog at the other end of the courtyard.

"People who smoke usually understand that it is bad for them. That it will kill them eventually. Yet they still smoke. They believe that the amount of happiness it brings to the present overcomes the amount of pain in the future."

Damian blinked dubiously.

"I just like to smoke, man."

"Heh, I guess that's it, then. Give me one of those, I'll partake in this with you."

Damian smiled and opened a small box of Camel cigarettes, reached inside and brought out the long cylinder. He handed it to his grandfather.

"Watch out, these cancer sticks'll kill ya."

"Already dying, son."

"Aren't we all."

Julian sat back down on the bench as he lit his cigarette. The damp air was balanced with the soft warm breeze, giving chills to his legs through the thin hospital smog.

"God's taking me, pieces by pieces. Sometimes an old man's bones are too heavy for him to lift to get out of bed, the weight of the years bearing down on him heavy like a tow-truck. Old people don't get

old because of biology, they get old because of the baggage they carry. You try holding 85 years of life on your shoulders and see how you fare."

He pushed his grandson's shoulder and brushed his hair. They sat under the gray sky, smoking their cigarettes slowly. He could feel the smoke tickling his tongue familiarly. It felt like re-visiting an old friend he hadn't seen in years, only to find out their friendship hadn't died down at all.

"What would you do if I told you I wanted to die?"

"Are you telling me that you want to die?"

"Not yet."

"I think everybody has a reason for wanting that, but we also always have a reason to keep holding on. To keep surviving, no matter what."

"Do we? Sometimes I wonder why I'm still here."

"Why you're still here and Martha's gone, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Julian watched the dog jump in the air graciously to catch a frisbee.

"It's like I'm standing in a giant waiting room waiting for my number to come up. Sometimes I want to get up and just yell at them to take me. How long should I wait as a dried out old prune in this miserable hospital?"

"Can't call them, Julian. They call you."

"Don't they say prayer's a direct line to the upper powers?"

"Don't know, never answered to me."

"Idiot." he smiled and looked affectionately at his grandson.

"Anyone ever told you that you look like your grandma?"

"Yeah," he flushed and scratched his nose lightly. "I don't see it though."

"Maybe you should smile more. Your grandma always had a smile. Even during... the final years."

"Hm." Damian threw his cigarette on the grass. "Wonder where she is now. If she's looking down on us, even remember..." He stopped, hoping he didn't step past the line.

"It's okay, Damian. I like to think so. I don't really know the exact workings of Heaven, but if there is the possibility of her looking down on us, watching us, I expect her soul remembers everything. If there's something out there."

"There's always that big if, right?"

"Son, that 'if' would make our efforts look like fish flopping on dry land, trying to reach the shore again."

The old man threw the cigarette in the grass halfway through it and stepped on it with his slipper. He started walking back toward the hospital. Damian followed him, not exactly sure what they were talking about.

"Come on, your mom will be worried. She thinks you're walking me to the bathroom."

As they walked back inside the room, Kylee ran in to meet them after seeing them from the end of the corridor. As she approached, Damian and Julian could see her usually straight hazelnut hair was now shriveled and she looked angry.

"Where the hell were you? I had half a mind to send the hospital staff looking for you. How long are you going to keep embarrassing me like that, Dad? How long until you understand that there are people around you who love you and expect certain things from you."

"Oh hush, Kylee. You always overdramatize everything. Damian and I are fine, we were just out for a cigarette."

“Outside? Smoking? Are you crazy? You're in a hospital! You fainted in your kitchen! Are you trying to kill yourself?” She crossed her arm and sat down on the long black chair next to the bed. “Now Dad, the doctors did not want to tell me anything. How are you doing? Did they find out what's wrong with you?”

“Nothing's wrong anymore, love. I'm just an old man doing old things.”

Julian asked Damian to help him onto the bed. Damian was reluctant to touch his grandfather, he could feel the bony arms under his fingers, feeling every vein on his body as if he lacked a major portion of his fat and muscles. Kylee sighed audibly as she passed a hand through her hair.

“Don't give me that 'Everything's gonna be alright' bullsh-” She glanced at her son and corrected herself. “... speech again. It won't work this time. What's wrong with you?”

Julian looked straight into his daughter's eyes.

“I have a blood clot in my brain. They said I only have one year to live. No more.”

“Oh.”

“That's what I said as well.”

A doctor knocked on the door and asked if he could do some tests with Mr. Cams in private. The two visitors quickly obliged him and waited in the corridor while Julian greeted the doctor.

“Hey, Doc.”

“Yes, Mr. Cams.”

“Can you do me a favor? Don't tell my family about the operation. I decided not to have it.”

The doctor seemed shocked at this decision, but was in the process of doing tests and could not give much attention to the old man.

“I don't understand, there is no other choice. You will die without this operation.”

"Won't we all. But, I can't afford to live without my memories. Without them, I am nothing."

"You're going to have to talk to your own doctor about this, I'm only in charge of these tests under his orders. I'll send him along if you wish."

"Please do, but remember to keep your mouth shut about the operation. My family would not understand."

"Nor do I, but I'll keep your secret."

As he left the room, he turned around and said, "A part of what makes a man is also his effect on the people around him. You wouldn't disappear. What you have accomplished during your life will still prevail." He smiled and closed the door behind him.

His appointed doctor came the next morning, during his primary rounds.

"How are we doing today, Mr. Cams?"

Julian rolled his eyes and deflected the question.

"What's on the medical menu for today?"

"Dr. Mans told me you had some questions about the coming operation."

"Questions? no, nothing like that. I'm not going to need any, because I've decided not to have it."

The doctor sat down on the chair next to the bed.

"I'm sorry, not have what?"

"Not have the operation, I don't want the operation."

The doctor looked as if he had gotten out of the wrong station in the metro. Caught completely unawares, he took a moment to collect himself.

"Why don't you want the operation?"

"All I need from the world now is to rest in peace and see Martha. This doesn't change what I was expecting to happen."

"Dad! What the hell?"

Kylee walked into the room suddenly, carrying her handpurse. She had clearly not slept that night and was looking weary from an excess amount of crying.

"What are they saying? You can get an operation?"

"Kylee, I'm sorry. This is a decision I must make on my own."

"On your own? What are we? You're part of our lives and we don't want you out!"

"You haven't lost."

"So this is a lesson?"

"Shut up, Kylee!"

Kylee gasped at her father's words. It stung in her heart like poison, the fear and shame oozing out of her, making her skin burn. Julian tried to hide wiping a tear in his eye.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled."

She turned and walked to the door, resting a hand on the doorframe.

"I miss her too, Dad. Sometimes I think you forget that."

She wiped her eyes and made to leave the room.

"I just... " Kylee turned at her father's words. "Ever since your mom died I spent every single day trying to get into grips of the fact that I'm at the last little bits of my life. I spent my time struggling with my own mortality. I was finally ready to go, Kylee. I was finally appreciating everything in my life and was ready to get to the other side on a firm foot. How will I be able to go if I don't have this anchor? What will keep me sane in front of the big wall of insanity that is Death?"

Julian spent the rest of the week deep in thought. How could he choose? His daughter needed him, but how could he help her if he could not remember who she was? He did not want to be a burden for them either. He turned off the television and reclined the bed back to take a nap. Whatever choice he would take, it seemed like it'd be the wrong one. A nurse came in with his miniature lunch.

"Really, we should have a talk about this joke of a meal." He inspected the tiny milk carton. "That's gotta be the punchline."

He propped open the carton and brought it to his mouth. He felt a dampness grow on his trousers. Surprised, he looked down and saw a trail of white liquid flowing down his leg, onto the bed and dripping to the floor.

The nurse looked at him worriedly, "Mr. Cams? Are you alright?"

Julian wanted to speak, but his tongue felt bloated and numb. His hand holding the empty milk carton seemed frozen in place. Machines around him beeped alarmingly. The nurse poorly tried to hide her fear and pressed a button behind Julian. A team of nurses entered the room and a doctor soon followed.

"The clot's stuck, we'll have to rush him to the OR."

Julian wanted to resist, wanted to yell that it was a mistake. He could not let Martha die again, but like the other times, he was powerless to stop it. Two nurses grabbed him and moved him onto a stretcher so the whole team could move on to the operation room. He could feel his heart beating fast inside his chest, he could sense every contracted muscle tense up as they moved. Is this how it would end? His skull would be drilled into without his say? As the last hope for justice left him, the doctor closed Julian's scared eyes.

Julian felt his mind wander, lost between his dreams and reality.

It is an odd feeling, he thought. I thought it'd be harder.

Through the haze of his mind, he remembered his wife before her illness. He remembered the smell of Saturday mornings in bed, lazing around playfully. He visualized her in front of him. She had that look she used to have when they had first met. The one that could see right through all his pretense and bravado to reach him directly. It was the look that made him sure that she was the one for him. He had to reach her, he had to be with her again, no matter what. He willed himself to move toward her, to shed his current skin and get to where she stood. He felt like he could, if he could just want it hard enough, if he could just let go. Except he didn't, his body stayed where it was. He saw Julian reach Martha. Perhaps it wasn't all that bad, maybe we would reach peace after all. She smiled at the old man, opening her arms reassuringly. "I missed you." It was Julian's voice, but it wasn't him.

A new man smiled and opened his eyes, wondering who he was and what he was doing in a hospital.



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