

What Is There To Say?

L . F . R O T H

YOU ARE SITTING on one side, your son and daughter on the other. No curtains frame the bed – this is a private room. Your daughter is the one who arrived last: there are no trains at night from where she lives, nor does she have a car. When she pushed the door open, cautiously, your son got up to fetch another chair and she took his. He is now close to the foot of the bed but still has an unobstructed view. The head of the bed is raised at a 45-degree angle.

This is not the picture that you see, of course – yours is more limited. You rarely even look across the bed but have your eyes fixed on your husband.

There has been no change. His skin is pale but no more than before. His eyes are still wide open and unseeing. He doesn't blink. After each breath there is a pause, unvaried in length. The tubes are there, just as before: thin ones that run to his nostrils from behind his ears and are connected to the wall outlet for oxygen via a thicker one curled up peacefully on his chest; a catheter that forms a loop at the side of the bed before it disappears out of view. Hospital corners hold the bedclothes in place.

“Will you be back in the morning?” he had asked when you left in the late afternoon.

You had been, every morning, for the last six days, so there

was no need for his question, nor for an answer. You nodded, gave him a hug, making sure you stayed clear of all tubes. You didn't turn around in the doorway. You knew he would go back to watching TV or just rest. At this point you regret that you did not – a minor regret, as regrets go, to be followed, no doubt, by countless others. That must be one of the consequences of death.

For a moment you take your eyes off your husband and peer at your son and daughter, wondering how they will cope.

“He loved you very much,” you say, keeping your voice down.

You are embarrassed when you realize that you used the past tense. What if he can hear you?

“Still does, I'm sure,” you add, though the idea that he should have strong feelings for others at this stage seems almost absurd. You squeeze his hand; you have been holding it since you sat down. You no longer expect a response and there is none.

“Mum, don't,” says your daughter.

“Don't what?” you ask.

“Don't treat us like children.”

“I'm not,” you say.

“You know you are.”

You shrug.

“Well, to me you are.”

Your son frowns.

“Stop it. Both of you.”

He is right – this is not the time or place – but nonetheless, you are annoyed; you shift a little in your chair in remonstrance. As you do, you notice that the trapezelike handle that used to be above the bed is gone; the pole that holds it has been swung around and is kept flush against the wall. No-one will reach for it, of course. Your husband will not lift himself up or adjust his position ever again. You blink to keep back the tears, for though you knew, it hurts. To calm yourself you fix your gaze on the tubes, grey against the white of the gown. You look intently at the pillow, clean but creased, sporting lines

like those in the palm of one's hand, held down by his weight – what little weight there is.

“Did you have supper before you set off?” You steal a glance at your daughter as you ask the question, not quite facing her. She has grown thinner, hasn't she? “You have to eat, no matter what.”

“Mum, I'm twenty-eight.”

“Still.”

“Not again.” Your son stands up, catching his chair before it hits the floor. “I have to get some air.”

He can open the window, you say, but he is gone.

Your daughter ignores you.

Time moves slowly. Your son returns. He doesn't say where he has been. Other than that there are no interruptions. No nurse peeks in, no doctor, though one must be on call. “It won't be long,” was the message you received a little after six o'clock; you had just finished your own supper. You had been surprised: when you left him, he had seemed no weaker than before. It is now nearly one. You have been here for well over five hours, as has your son; your daughter close on three.

“Who brought you?” You had not thought to ask. “Clive, was it?”

“Why Clive? I haven't seen him for years.”

“He was nice.”

“Mum.”

But the point is worth making.

“I know,” you say. “I liked him, though. You should have...”

“Mum!”

The interruption comes from both of them this time, like a voice with a built-in echo.

You wonder again how much he can hear, if anything. His eyes reveal nothing, nor does his body stir beyond the slight movement caused by the five or six breaths he takes each minute, so quiet, so calm as to be almost imperceptible. Should you try talking to him? If you did, what could you say? What do night nurses talk about when they watch over a patient?

Perhaps your son's thoughts have gone in the same direction.

"I'd like to be alone with Dad," he says.

"Of course." You try to hide your surprise. "Now?" you ask, in case you have misunderstood him, making assumptions that have nothing to do with his needs.

He nods.

"Not after ..."

"No."

"All right."

You let go of your husband's hand and stand up. For a second or two your head spins. This often happens when you get up quickly, but the dizziness never lasts. Your daughter is on her way out. You follow her.

"Come and get us when you're done," you say, hearing as you utter the words that it is the wrong phrase.

The corridor is empty. At one end, in an alcove, is a table with some chairs. Your daughter is on her way there. When you catch up, she has walked over to a window and has her back to you. You join her. Outside the sky is black – you see no moon, no stars. Below, at street level, there is nobody about; there is no traffic at all.

"Does he just want to be with Dad?" you ask.

"I suppose so. Or talk to him. So?"

"Oh, nothing," you say, but that is not what you think. There must be something troubling him and then, why turn to his father? What good will that do at this time?

You sit down at the table. Your daughter remains by the window. Neither of you speaks, but the result is not a comfortable silence.

"Did you offer to pay for the petrol?" you ask.

"Yes," she says.

And had she? She volunteers nothing, but you decide to let it go. Leave her alone, you caution yourself. She doesn't want to talk.

The minutes drag by. There is a clock in the corridor, but if it had not been for the second hand, you would have thought it had stopped. You watch the minute hand. It moves every thirty seconds, soundlessly, and each time trembles slightly in its new position as if the strain involved in getting there had

been nearly unbearable. At some point you nod off. When you come to, there is still no sign of your son. Nor is your daughter there.

At two fifteen the door to your husband's room is pulled open and your son comes out to get you. He appears to have been crying, but you are not sure – he may simply have washed his face to stay awake. You do not ask – this is no time for questions – but return to your seat by the bed. The room seems airless after the corridor, but otherwise nothing has changed. Your husband's breathing is still as regular as before, his eyes equally lifeless. You take his hand, again hold it in yours.

"I tried to find a coffee machine."

It is your daughter's voice – you must have nodded off again. Half asleep, you check your watch and see that it is almost three – at least you are getting through the night. You reproach yourself at the thought. That is not what this is about. But what it is about you do not want to face.

"Was there one?" you ask.

But she had only come across a cafeteria that was closed.

"Too bad," you say. "We could all do with a cup." You regret the inclusion, or exclusion, that the word 'all' implies, but any qualification would make matters worse.

Encouraged, perhaps, by your comment, your daughter searches in her handbag. What she brings out is her mobile phone.

"You can't use that here," you tell her. "There are signs everywhere. You'll have to go outside."

"I'd like to take his picture," she says. "Can I, Mum?"

A picture here? You shake your head. This is not how she will want to remember him. Nor would your husband want her to, of that you are sure. To your surprise, she doesn't argue but puts the phone away.

A little before five o'clock you sense that there is a slight change in your husband's breathing. At first you can't determine what that change is – what little sound he makes has not altered at all – but then you realize that the pause between one breath and the next is longer than it was. You grow tense waiting, so intent on listening that you notice nothing else. This

could go on forever, you think, fully aware that each breath could in fact be the last. This one. This one. You count the seconds between breaths. You slow the count down as if that would help keep him alive. One more. One more. And then, although there is no final spasm, no desperate last gasping for air, it is obvious that it is over. There is no sound.

A numbness comes over you. You feel shut off from everything around you, from the room you are in, from your son and daughter, but saying that is wrong: you do not feel. You look at the hand you are holding, but there is no-one, no-one, nothing, there. The truth leaps at you: you will never feel again.

Then someone must have fetched a nurse; it may well have been you. The tubes are gone. There is a doctor in the room – there are procedures that have to be followed.

“You’ll want a little time alone with him,” the doctor says. “Do you want me to close his eyes?”

“No,” you say, “I’ll do it.”

But even as you do, as you move your hand slowly, gently, over your husband’s forehead, past his eyes, and softly touch his lips with the inside of your thumb, you know that the picture you will carry with you, the one that will appear superimposed on every memory – when you glance at the chair that used to be his, or across the table where he used to sit, or at his side of the bed as you pull back the covers – what you will see will be what your eyes, your mind, have focused on all night, his head against the pillow, his face divided by the tubes, his eyes unblinking, staring blindly, seeing nothing. Nothing. That is what will remain with you.

You straighten the sheet across his chest.

“There,” you say. “There.”

But if the words leave your lips, you are the only one who hears them. No-one else.