

Epilogue

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Our meeting was incidental, unplanned; we had found ourselves in the same place, at the same time. You hadn't chosen to be there at all, and I was early enough in my career to feel as though I didn't belong there either. You were introduced to me as an educational experience, as an exemplar of a body on the cusp of expiration. Of course, the cruelty of this sentiment was veiled in medical jargon: "Palliative Performance Scale 10%." Your chart denoted other labels: "Traumatic brain injury," "Subdural hematomas," "Comatose," "Palliative."

Your name, the only label that truly belonged to you, was Mirta.

We knew, early on, that neither incision nor drug would change the course of your story. Your care plan was written in another piece of jargon — "comfort measures only" — but what was comfort to you? You had no words for how much you hurt, who you wanted by your side, or how to honour you in the years to come. You could not tell us if you were hungry or thirsty, if you were angry, frightened or relieved. If you believed in heaven, or wanted to. My preceptors comforted me, telling me that every story has a beginning and an end. You simply hadn't been granted the luxury of writing your own conclusion.

In your silence, we turned to your ghostwriters to lead the way forward. Their names were Ada, Tom and Angie; they were characters from your true narrative, the one whose joys and sorrows had taken place, for the entirety of your life, beyond the walls of the hospital. Every day, they would sit by your bedside, contemplating your silence with an unbreakable serenity. In my loss for words, they offered their own, recounting to me chapters of your life that the thick



medical chart, although rife with labels, had failed to capture. Your mother tongue was Spanish, your roots in Cuba and Florida. You were retired, having worked for years as a laboratory technician — your name was immortalized in dozens of scientific papers. You hated having your photograph taken, but occasionally you obliged. You had your vices; at 87, cigarettes remained a dependable friend. You

were strong-willed, stubborn and fiercely independent.

Though they didn't tell me, I could tell that Ada, Tom, and Angie cherished you deeply. When they spoke about you, their faces would soften, their eyes filled with a deep sense of anguish. *What if we had been home earlier? What if we hadn't chosen to go out that day? What if we had called to check in?*

“It isn’t anybody’s fault,” I would say. “You did everything you could.”

One morning, I came to check in on you. Ada, Tom and Angie hadn’t yet arrived. I greeted you good morning, laying my hand on your arm. “How are you feeling? Did you sleep well last night? Any pain this morning?” I told you about the weather outside; how it was the nicest day we’d had in a while, how the clouds had cleared and how we were expecting our first snowfall. You were always a generous listener; in my pauses between questions, I imagined the stories you would tell, if you could.

That morning, your eyelids flickered open and you squinted at me, as if trying to place me from another time. “Hi,” you breathed. In my surprise, I responded instinctively. I asked you how you felt. “Not good,” you mumbled. Your eyes fell shut, and we never spoke again.

Your eyes were the same shade of soft, glossy brown as Ada’s.

On the last day of my rotation, I came to say goodbye. Ada, Tom and Angie were there; they wished me well, and I told them to take care. We exchanged wry smiles that shielded our sense of loss and disguised our unspoken understanding. I saved my goodbye to you for last, knowing all too well that it wasn’t a temporary parting.

Your hand caught mine as I started to step away; you grasped it tightly, not letting go. I sat with you for several moments longer, then squeezed your hand to leave. Jokingly, I told you to behave yourself, to avoid causing the nurses any trouble. You played along and immediately reached for your femoral line, pretending to pull it out, just as I was turning away. In the corner of my eye, I

saw Ada, Tom and Angie jump to restrain you; then, Ada glanced up at me, her wet eyes filled with amusement, as if to say, *you should have seen that coming*.

When I left the room, the brave, wry smile onto which I clung so desperately fell apart. I laughed uncontrollably — and then, I wept. The tragedy, the rapidity of your life’s denouement, had broken my heart. And yet in our farewell, you had mustered enough humour for the both of us. You had reminded me that your closing line was yet to come — that in those precious, fleeting moments, you were still present, still alive, and in many ways, still yourself. With this, you completed my heart just as swiftly as you had broken it.

You left, in your own time, and in your own way.

You weathered the Christmas holiday, waiting until your family had settled from the festivities and you had made your mark on the new year.

The day before you left, Angie and I came across each other. We spoke briefly; she told me you were still holding on, that you were comfortable. I didn’t tell her that in the days after I had last left you, I had cried bitterly, unable to contend with your mortality or with my own. I didn’t tell her that over the holiday, I had combed the newspaper obituaries every week, searching for your epilogue, some arrangement of words I could use to anchor your life into my memory. Every week, when I reached the end of the list, the relief of knowing that you were, in fact, not *past*, but still *present*, was offset by my desperate craving for closure. I hoped that the inevitable end of your story would not be too long or too arduous. I prayed that the pages would keep

on turning and that this chapter, too, would come to pass.

I think you knew this about me. I think you knew that I would need to hear the ending of your story.

The next morning, I received an email from Angie. Your hospital label finally read “expired.” When I received the news, the grief that flooded me was balanced by a sense of relief, a reminder that a story without an ending, without a definitive frame, is no story at all. Undoubtedly, the plot that had unfolded before your last days was cruel and undeserved; yet its resolution ushered in an ending to your story that I hope was in some way as beautiful as the beginning, if only because those final days ultimately brought wholeness and completion to the beauty of the rest of your narrative.

In Angie’s message, she thanked me for my kindness.

Instinctively, I wrote back, hoping my words would find their way to you.

Thank you for teaching me about the art of writing beautiful stories.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

At the request of the family, the names of the people in this article were not changed; they felt that sharing this piece with actual names would be a suitable way of honouring their relative. Written consent to tell this story was obtained.

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