

Tomorrow by Catherine Sleeman

Tomorrow, the carer who comes to wash and feed your father every morning won't be able to wake him.

Tomorrow, you'll come downstairs to bran flakes and the news that Britain has voted to leave the European Union. That will be the only thing the headlines want to talk about when you're standing next to the newspaper rack in the supermarket, receiving the call to say that he's gone. Tomorrow, you will snap in half in Sainsbury's, while the woman on the phone tells you that you've no longer got anyone to be a child to.

Tomorrow, you'll drive three hundred miles to fetch your son back from university for the summer. You will spend those five hours on the motorways wondering what you're supposed to say when you see him. Later, when you sit in his flat and tear the stringy cheese from your pizza, you'll realise how much you love him. Enough that you wish you'd never brought him into the world. Enough to want to spare him the agony of being orphaned.

Tomorrow, your daughter will be at school and it will be your husband who has to tell her what you've lost. He'll bring her home at morning break and she won't ever go back there. In your absence, they'll try to iron the bed sheets and he'll cook her a meal that she won't eat because she no longer has a grandfather to make risotto with.

Today, though, you don't know any of this. None of it has happened yet. Today, after you've finished washing the dishes, you cycle over to his house. You admire the sky bubbling above the allotment, and the illusion of freedom that having a bike beneath you creates. You feel alive.

You sort his washing and decide to leave that pale blue jersey of his out of the machine so that he can wear it tomorrow. You charge the feeding device that the carer hooks his stomach tube to and you don't let yourself imagine what is coming. You say to him what only his daughter can and he smiles at you because, for the first time since his diagnosis, he sees the future more clearly than you do. When it's time to leave, you put the breathing mask over his face. You always do it last because

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you hate the way it alters him. Your father becomes alien with his grey skin and his elephant trunk of plastic tubing.

You squeeze his hand and cycle home.

When you get in, you don't bother putting the radio on to hear the exit poll. You don't anticipate the result, you don't believe that more than half of your country wants it to be an island. Your husband has already gone to bed and you stand in the half-light to watch the shape of him. You grieve for your children's father and his endlessly imploding nerves and inexhaustible tiredness.

You lie in bed, alone beside him. You don't read. You don't even think about your father, about how he used to swim and how it was that first loss of muscular control in the swimming pool that betrayed his motor neurone disease. About how you spent Christmas understanding what he didn't yet know. You don't think about all the miles he used to drive, about how he secretly liked Wagner, about how he always fell asleep after lunch. You don't think about how he loved sweet things and creamy things or how he'd only eat onions if he didn't know they were there. You don't think about the years he spent lifting your mother in and out of her wheelchair. You don't think about how he smiles at you or how he chokes on his own saliva. You don't think about the last time he ate a meal or about the pale blue jersey that you will find, empty, next week.

You don't think about the father he used to be; the one who drove you over humpback bridges so fast your head hit the roof, the one who took you on the Waltzer, the one who tried to make chips once and blew up the fryer. You don't think about scattering his ashes over Catbells; leaving him to the fells and the sheep and the wind and his wife. You don't think about how much he's always hated photographs and how difficult it will be to find one for the funeral. You don't think about him watching his three granddaughters in the garden, leaping over his flower pots. You don't think about how he didn't get angry when your son dropped bolognaise on his new carpet or when your daughter crashed his wife's mobility scooter. You don't think about his tomato plants. You don't think about the months it will take to sell his house.

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Your daughter comes in and hovers. She's small in her pyjamas these days, sleepless.

"Sorry," she whispers. Always the same word but she never says why.

Your husband wakes to her presence. Goes to her room and sits with her because they speak the same language. The same God awful language of unseen shadows and screaming silently.

You lie there, an island in the bed sheets, and think about how beautiful the summer night is through the curtains. Tomorrow, you will know that that nautical twilight was your father saying goodbye.