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Abstract

Gravity

"If he was a pet, we'd put him to sleep." That's what my sister says. If she was in a story, she would be an unlikeable character. She says this about our father, who's in the hospital with all kinds of problems. Liver, kidneys, heart, you name it. Beeps and burps and monitors screeching.

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Two Stories

by Sherrie Flick

Gravity

“If he was a pet, we’d put him to sleep.” That’s what my sister says. If she was in a story, she would be an unlikeable character. She says this about our father, who’s in the hospital with all kinds of problems. Liver, kidneys, heart, you name it. Beeps and burps and monitors screeching.

My sister tries her best. She does. But it’s hard to have empathy for her most days. And it isn’t the typical story. Our father wasn’t, isn’t, a monster. He drank too much, sure. But he was kind to us, spoiled us most days. My sister, she won’t have any of it. Needs to feel abused and neglected and put out over everything, including the type of pizza I’ve brought to her house. The red wine, when she wanted white.

“I’m just saying,” she says. “If my cat had the problems dad has? The vet would say: ‘I’m sorry Kathy. We have to put her down.’” I stare at her, pizza midway to my mouth, suddenly unhungry.

“Kathy,” I say. “Our dad is not a cat. He can drive and use his thumbs. He paid for your college education. Fluffy over there bats around that little

mouse toy on a good day. On a bad day she pukes up hairballs on your carpet.”

“Sure, yes. But that isn’t what I’m talking about,” Kathy says. “I’m just articulating the reality of the situation.”

My dad played badminton with us in the summers. Built us a tree house. Sure, he couldn’t handle girl adolescence; that’s when my mom stepped in and fucked things up a bit, sure. But, you know, he tried. He tried until he couldn’t try any more and an ambulance came and brought him to St. Mary’s. And now he’s a beeping mess of wires, and my sister refuses to visit him, like she’s proving a point.

“All I’m saying,” I say, “is you’re going to hate yourself if he dies and you don’t visit. Could you just visit? You know, for like 5 seconds? You’d visit Fluffy if you had to put her down, right?” I’ve succumbed to the pet metaphor against all better judgment.

“The cat’s name isn’t Fluffy. Do you honestly think I’d name an animal something like that? It’s Gertrude. You know that. Gertie. Get it right,” she says, avoiding the question.

Now I feel that old need to drink a lot of wine. It’s coming on strong, an itch in my neck, down deep where you can’t scratch. Glasses of wine. Goblets of wine. Wine enough to shut my sister up. My mom won’t talk to my sister because my sister won’t visit dad so the last few days have been me ping-ponging between everyone, acting like a social worker or a flight attendant, depending on where I am.

I pour another glass of Syrah. A big, fat glass.

My sister rummages through her fridge for a beer. “From what you’re telling me, he isn’t going to know if I visit or not,” she says and pulls out a cantaloupe, a green pepper. Starts slicing them both.

“Are you going to eat those together? What’s happened to you?” I say. I don’t understand anyone anymore. I moved away for a few years and everyone changed. My mother does yoga. Kathy eats weird food. My dad decomposes. My old boyfriend is fit and wealthy. I have stayed exactly, exactly the same except for the overwhelming realization that I love my

dad. I have always loved him. And right now my sister is breaking my heart. He is also breaking my heart, because—honestly—he’s the only one right now who could set everyone straight.

He’d say: “Kath—put that food back in the fridge. Sit down and talk with your sister you never see.” He’d say: “Drink the red wine, it won’t kill you, Joyce.” He’d say: “Mommy, you look ridiculous in those yoga pants, but hey grab your little mat and do what you can.” He’d say: “Joyce, get me a beer. Let’s talk about Johnny. Sure, he looks good and rich, but he never once remembered your birthday? You remember crying on the back porch about that? You remember how he once took you to Taco John’s to make up?” He’d say: “Me? Don’t worry about me. I’ve got everything under control.”

* * *

Sorrel

The rain streaked the windows of the little yellow house, and made a stitching noise against the glass, sealing up the world. Yellow rubber boots. Mud and puddles. Car tires rubbed down the street, tiny waterfalls spraying at their heels. The gray sky pushed down, making the world contract, come inside, where Elizabeth’s oatmeal pan had boiled dry.

How had that happened, she wondered. Time wasn’t right anymore. And in her confusion, her constant confusion of late, she’d lost her reading glasses. She stood in her housecoat—a frilly pink shell—with her ostrich legs, her puffy slippers. Elizabeth held a wooden spoon in her hand. But why? She was lost in this aquarium, would be lost now for a long time, she knew. She thought to pick up the phone. The hard black plastic in her hand gave her confidence. Elizabeth gripped it and for a moment a slippery fish of memory drew some numbers on a screen in her head. She dialed.

When the voice said hello, Elizabeth said, Hello. Who is this? And of course, yes, it was her daughter, wasn’t it? A daughter who would come right over, now, yes? But this daughter didn’t live nearby, had moved away years ago she reminded her mother right then. And then this daughter asked, “Where’s dad, mom? Isn’t he there to help you?”

Of course, how could she have forgotten. There was Stanley on the stairs, hair sticking up, so gray. When did it get so gray? And stumbling now and

looking alarmed and grabbing the phone from her hand and talking, talking, talking into it. Charming, really. He'd always been that way, hadn't he? Or no. Stanley had been dull at times and then gained a kind of charm later in life.

He set down the black plastic thing, looked at Elizabeth in a way she believed was love. She said, Are you concerned?

And he looked out the window at the drizzle, look at Elizabeth. He said, Elizabeth, what did you try to cook this morning? I thought we'd agreed we'd only cook together, remember?

Elizabeth looked at the spoon in her hand, a big wooden spoon, too big to eat from. It was most certainly used for stirring things. She hid it behind her back. She said, The rain?

Stanley hugged her then, and in hugging her gently took the spoon away. Elizabeth felt her body flatten against his, naked under her housecoat. She so badly wanted so many things she could no longer name. This, for instance. What was it?

Stanley set her down in a chair, smoothed his hair, pulled his own robe a little tighter over his pajamas. Did he clean this kitchen, she wanted to know? It was really very nicely done.

He told her that no, Sammi came in twice a week now, but yes, Sammi did a great job, didn't she? It made them both more comfortable, didn't it? A clean house. Stanley made her toast, spreading the butter and jam carefully with his thick fingers. He didn't have much practice at this kind of thing, she could tell.

And she ate, and the rain continued to move throughout the town. A slow sweep of it, dense and unforgiving. The silence in the kitchen seemed natural. Perhaps they'd sat in silence this way many times? She wanted to know, did he want to read the newspaper? Hadn't he always done that? But now he said, no, he wanted to be with her instead. And that seemed sweet. He held her hand.

I used to make you marvelous meals, she said, guessing.

Yes, he said.

And I was beautiful, she said.

Yes, he said. And you're still beautiful. It's just that we're getting so much older now, you see?

She said, we were lovers and happy. We had a good, simple life, didn't we?

And now Stanley was tearing up a little, but he said, yes, we did, we had a good life. We had children and several pets—although some of the pets and some of the children were impossible at times. Yes, we had a good life that was complicated by some mistakes but might be called simple and happy.

Elizabeth smiled, yes, I remember, she said.

Stanley said, I'm sorry, Elizabeth. You know that, right? I'm sorry for what I put you through. I was a fool for a while, and then a jackass. But you see now, now I'm taking care of you? I can love you like I've always wanted to.

Yes, of course, she said. Sorry. It's such a nice word, isn't it? She thought about sorrow and sorry and sorrel, which she used to grow, that she remembered clearly. The spring rains, the green leaves, the tiny plants reaching up to the sun.

She didn't remember the bad times. She believed that no one did, anymore. The world had changed and now everyone was happy.

Sherrie Flick is the author of the flash fiction chapbook I Call This Flirting (Flume) and the novel Reconsidering Happiness (Bison Books). Select anthologies include Flash Fiction Forward (Norton), New Sudden Fiction (Norton), and The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction. A recipient of a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant, she lives in Pittsburgh where she teaches, edits, gardens, and cooks.

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