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Miss Murphy's Record



It's interesting, the things people say in their last moments. Sometimes, they try to rush everything in at once, as though they can summarize their years of wisdom in a sentence or two. Other people cry out for God, their mothers, their husbands or wives. Yet others say nothing at all. Old Jacob Applebaum looked at me and my notepad, shook his head once, and died without a peep. His wife Holly Applebaum, on the other hand, gave an entire monologue before she passed on. But whatever the words, I'm supposed to record them in the Diary of Departures for future generations.

I read the list of departures every morning during my breakfast, which consists of a half grapefruit with one packet of sweetener and one piece of buttered, whole-grain toast sliced diagonally. I wash that down with a glass of milk on my way out the door. My assistant scribe Mallory follows me with the Diary and we make our way across town to the hospital.

Today, the list has three departures listed. Although each patient is expected to die today, there is no way of knowing who will go when.

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Some may even last through tomorrow, when their names will move to the top of the list.

I maintain a brisk pace without pausing until I reach the nurses' station. "Good morning, Joanne. List?" Nurse Trudy is my favorite because she knows the routine and doesn't waste time. "Looks like you've got a busy day. I'll pull the charts." I watch her walk through doors marked *Staff Only* behind the desk.

Then I examine the desk, as I do every day, looking at all the black specks in clusters of varying sizes and shapes scattered across the blue-gray surface. If I let my eyes go out of focus, I can see a horse leaping through the middle of a brown circle where a careless nurse left her mug. By the spilled red drop of sparkling nail polish, there is a hooded figure, the Grim Reaper perhaps. Rather fitting, I think. Just as I begin to wonder which President the speck by Trudy's name placard resembles, she reappears with the files I need.

"Here you go. I'd probably start with Miss Murphy. She's been on that list for nearly a week now, almost a record. I think she's going to go soon." Her tone is matter-of-fact, like she doesn't realize it's good to have a new record. That it's good to outlive the odds.

"Thanks, Trudy. I'll be back at the end of the day." I head toward the elevator with Mallory at my heels. "Looks like we're starting with Miss Everly Murphy."

"According to the chart, she's on the 16th floor in the burn unit. Her apartment complex burned down when a neighbor's... laboratory exploded. She was first placed on the list six days ago after a sudden decline in her condition. Twenty-four. No family, friends, or pets."

Everly Murphy's story is, unfortunately, a common one. Crime has been on the rise in our town for over a decade with no signs of stopping. Drug labs explode weekly, murderers roam the streets at night, and cars are stolen in broad daylight. Mayor Gillson is doing what he can, but there's just not enough to go around, so people turn to crime to get by.

In these troubled times, my job is especially important. When society loses its way, it becomes more vital than ever to remember the words of the departed. It reminds us of our shared humanity, according to the Governor.

The elevator stops with a shudder at the 16th floor and we enter the burn unit. Stepping through the doors, screams and whimpers of victims greet us. The hospital's twenty-five floors form a hollow circle with a large garden in the center. Everly is supposed to be in room 37, directly across the circle from the elevator. The rooms closer to the

elevator are given to patients with hopes of improving so nurses and doctors can reach them more quickly.

"Mallory, please prepare the Diary for the newest entry. Leave the name blank for now. Miss Murphy might surprise us yet." As we walk, Mallory pulls the large leatherbound book from the bag slung over her shoulder. She is the tallest assistant I have ever had by at least a foot and comes from the next town over. I believe her father is a dairy farmer, but we've never officially discussed it.

At room 37, I assume my professional demeanor. It is important for a scribe to remain slightly detached or the work can become overwhelming. Over the past six days, I have grown to admire Everly Murphy, in spite of my best efforts.

"Good morning, Miss Murphy," I say, opening the door slowly.

"It's rather early. I guess they told you I'm supposed to go first?" She lost all of her hair and most of her skin in the blaze. Her face, when not covered in bandages, is a frightening shade of red. The first time I saw her, I struggled not to gasp.

"How are we feeling today, Miss Murphy?"

"Please dismiss with the niceties. You're not here to breakfast with me. You're here because I'm going to die. At least call me Everly."

"How are you feeling today, Everly?"

"Ecstatic, I believe I'm ready to be discharged."

"If you do not feel ready for your departure, I can return later." She is the most stubborn patient I have encountered in my work. Most people are on the list no more than twice, although the record is eight days.

"Let's do that," she lifts her withered wrist to dismiss me. "Close the door."

I don't want to leave, but I have to follow protocol. I can't miss the other two departures, so I close the door and go back to the elevator.

"Joanne, has anyone ever gone off the list without dying?"

"Not to my knowledge. Why?" She nods her head toward Everly's door. "Ah. If anyone is stubborn enough, it would be Miss Murphy. But, scribes must remain impartial. Do not allow your emotions to get the best of you. Now, who's next?"

We moved through the other two departures within one hour. Mr. David was an old-age departure, so he had an index card with his last words prepared. He dictated them to me and then sat silently by the window. It took me a moment to realize he was dead, then I called the nurses and went to the next room.

The middle-aged Mrs. Sparrow was dying of cancer, so she was

also somewhat prepared. Unlike both Mr. David and Everly, her bed was attended by dozens of family members and friends. That's another purpose of the scribe: companionship. Mrs. Sparrow gave a lovely speech about family that reduced everyone present, excluding myself and Mallory, to tears. I wrote down the last words and stayed only ten minutes. When she passed on, it was time to return to Everly.

"Oh, it's you again." The disappointment in her voice surprises me, although it shouldn't. "I fell asleep and thought maybe it was a new day, or I was finally dead. Either one would be preferable to this again."

"How are you feeling, Everly?"

"Like death." I know she was being sarcastic, but there was still a hint of sincerity in that sentence. It poked holes in her tough exterior.

"Do you have your last words ready?"

"No. I'm twenty-four."

"I'm not sure how that's relevant."

"I'm not supposed to have last words ready. I'm twenty-four." For the first time since I met her, I can see how scared she is.

"Some people choose to remain silent. If this is your wish, nod once." I had to follow protocol. If she didn't have any words, she was supposed to nod.

"I don't want to be silent. I don't want to die."

"There are a variety of stock phrases and sayings, including poems. You may choose one of those if you cannot think of anything." That was a new option. Some people couldn't think of their last words, but they wanted to have something in the Diary.

"I don't want your damn stock phrases! I don't want silence. I don't have a prepared speech. I don't have any wisdom to impart. I have nothing to contribute that will 'remind us of our shared humanity.' How can you just sit there and look at me while I'm dying?" Her heart rate monitor spiked rapidly throughout her speech. I grab the diary from Mallory and open to the blank space I ordered her to prepare earlier.

"As a scribe, it is my job to—"

"I know what your job is." The monitor's lines leap to the edges of the screen as the beeps grow more frequent and louder. "Fine. You need my last words for your precious book?"

"If you are ready, I can begin." I take the cap off of my silver pen and press it to the page. The afternoon light streams in and casts the sterile room in an orange glow.

"I am twenty-four years old. I wanted to die at eighty-five, but here I am. If you're reading this, for whatever reason, know that life sucks and it's too short. Don't trust people who say you have enough

time. They're lying." The monitor slows down with her final words. The beeping gets slower and slower before stopping at last.

I close the Diary, preserving Everly's last words inside, and hand it back to Mallory. She will take it to the City Hall for filing among the thousands of other Diaries. Maybe someone will read it in the future and gain something from it, but more likely it will be lost in the stacks.

I close her eyes and press the button for nurses. When Trudy arrives, she realizes who it is and says, "About time. She lasted six days on that list."

"Almost a record," another nurse points out.

On my way out of the door, I nod. "Yeah. Almost."