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Last days

by Victoria Cooper

When she knew she was dying she asked her husband a question; a question that he could not answer then or for some time afterwards. The question fell from her like the heavens opening, “How does it feel to be followed?”

She had been ill for so long now he could not remember a day go by without seeing her sat staring at music students streaming like driving rain in and out of the Academy opposite. So still, her forehead pressed against the hospital window, watching them wrestle with cello cases in the revolving door, as drops of rain reflected on her pale moon face. She said she enjoyed watching their busyness, like the storm brewing inside her lungs, it flooded her senses with motion and hope.

Initially she had taken it well; the hospital appointments, the endless injections, the indignity of backless gowns. Later when the pain began to overwhelm, she was less forgiving. She felt drenched in statistics and choices of care, none of which spelt out recovery.

He hated it, the bubbles of downpouring grief that rose up in him as he searched with jealousy over her closed eyes. If only it had been him, she would have been self-sacrificing with her freckled hands, she would have been a balm to him with her cups of tea and good grace. They both knew, she would have been so much better at caring than him.

He scanned the books in the Hospital shop, looking for something she had not already read. A blonde-haired woman caught his attention as she blew in through the electric doors, flapping her umbrella like a crow spat out by the rain. She shook herself and when she caught his eye, she smiled unabashedly and the familiar guilt burnt his cheeks as he quickly returned to the bestsellers.

They scurried from the hospital room in the drizzle, and he failed to remember where he had parked the car. He snapped impatiently at her and scanned the tarmac, but still noticed her cower in her coat as she felt the rain slip down the collar, wetting her neck and shoulders. She was awash with fluids in and out of her sodden body and felt it slipping down the downpipes, falling through the gaps in the drain, washing down the sluice pipes until she was part of the backwash lying placid on the road.

The last night she found hard to swallow, he sat up all night, waving away the twilight nurses, punishing himself by reading her poetry. He leaned close to her to tell her he loved her, but her slack mouth stopped him from going on.

If only she had been the one sitting here, he swooned, then he knew she would have chosen the right words to say.

Her breath shallowed and he closed his eyes, finally at peace; but when opening them again, he froze, she lay staring back at him, her eyes burning with hate, "this is what following feels like," she said.