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Death Bed

by Janie Reynolds

I moved through the days like a severed head that finishes a sentence.

Time was only held together by the hospice meals that came and smelled of gravy and then went.

My heart still beat and my lungs inhaled but the rest of me felt grounded on the banks of death, beached half in light, half in darkness, the weight of life bearing more heavily upon me than the weight of death.

If only my head could have granted me just one day of peace. A day free from worry. A day without dread. One day when I could laugh at my internal conflict and push it over a cliff.

But, like a runner finding a last wind just before the finishing line, my old brain had saved the best for last. It had so much to say, so many 'last words'. How it wished I'd said this and not said that. It wanted to clear my conscience because suddenly death was no longer in the future. It was present tense.

Do animals desperately try to fill in the gaps, taking each other aside and whispering repentances to each other before they die? Or do they let the gaps just be? Do they even know they are dying? I was taught they don't but I think they do. Is a bird flying in the blue sky above, fretting about what she said yesterday to a different bird? (That would ruin the image, I know.) Do animals worry? I was taught they don't but I think they do.

What they didn't tell me, my teachers, was how afraid we all are. And that even on my death bed I would be biting my nails. Thanks to our "intelligence" which surpasses that of all other living beings and allows us to see things from different perspectives. On my death bed I knew I was dying but I also knew that I wasn't yet dead.

So, I tried to work out how long I had to quickly get my confessions out without living to face the consequences. I hoped my death would free me of all ramifications.

But then I wondered, what if I believed in karma? Would the fall-out of my sins in this life follow me to the next, even after a quick confession? If my place were to be a spoke on the wheel of reincarnation, would it be better not to say a word to anyone, in case I offend them with my disclosures. Oh dear, dying was complicated. I wanted my cake and to eat it. I wanted to sneak in somewhere in the middle, in the best of both worlds.

And there was little time to waste. I had to make my repentances quickly as I could feel I was slipping away. A short sharp shock for my beloveds was better, surely, than a lifelong string of lies. If one's mother's last words were, "I never wanted you, you were a mistake," better than to have been told that when you were 5. If your husband's were "I never loved you, I only stayed because I couldn't find anyone else," better his dying words than 10 years into the marriage. And what if a Priest waited until your very last breath to tell you that there was no heaven? Or to inform you that you're going to Hell? Better to have lived an optimistic life.

So I called everyone around me and cleared my throat to begin my atonement. But boy was I in for a nasty surprise. Death is not that daft it seems. As I tried to unburden my sins, like a football team going crazy at the end of overtime, I found that the tissues of my tongue and the muscles of my mouth, had died a few moments before my brain. I could not speak word, and sentences built up at the back of my throat. 'Spit it out, spit it out!' I ordered myself. But I just couldn't.

They wrote that my breathing just stopped on my death certificate. But that wasn't it. I choked to death on my confessions.