

HELEN PHILLIPS

LIFE CARE CENTER

Across the hall from the room where my sister may or may not be dying, there is a woman who moans *help* all day long.

Should we help her? I eventually ask my parents.

Help who? my father says.

The woman who keeps saying *help*, my husband says.

No, she doesn't need any help, my mother says.

What lovely sunflowers, I say. What lovely orchids. How kind.

Have you sanitized your hands? my mother says. You have to sanitize your hands.

Orchids and sunflowers, I say. They look surprisingly good together, don't they.

At first, we, too, wanted to help the woman who says *help*, my father says. But the nurses told us she says it all day, every day.

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Are you guys hungry? my father says. There are chocolates over there.

Did you have anything on the plane? my mother says.

Isn't it hard to believe you woke up in Brooklyn this morning, and now you're here in Colorado? my father says.

Hey, she smiled! my husband says. Look, she's smiling.

Oh wow, my father says. Great. Wow. Look at that.

Hi there, girl, I say.

Smiley, smiley girl, my mother says. You're smiling because you know your little sister and her boyf—husband flew all the way across this great big country to visit you, aren't you, girly-girl?

You had us scared, you know that? I say.

Thank you for smiling, precious, my mother says.

On the TV, the barn-raising scene in the musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Six brothers in their bright shirts dance on a sawhorse. My father and my husband crank my sister's hospital bed to the full upright position.

A confession: I have never looked into my sister's eyes and seen there anything that resembled recognition. Sometimes when we were children, I would accidentally call her by the dog's name—*Hush, Freck!* I might say when

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she moaned—before quickly correcting myself, hoping my parents hadn't heard.

In bed, the smiley girl smiles.

In the newly opened café across the highway from the Life Care Center, there are thirteen varieties of dessert on the other side of the glass case: rhubarb bread pudding, peach pie, apple pie, chocolate cake, carrot cake, cinnamon rolls, chocolate chip cookies, oatmeal raisin cookies, cranberry scones, lemon bars, almond croissants, chocolate croissants, chocolate cupcakes. *Everything baked on the premises! Including the ciabatta!*

Awed, genuinely awed, we ask the owner, *How do you do it all?* She does it single-handedly. She has red hair and big yellow teeth. She says, Well if you want to know how I do it for say the pie I would make a bunch of pastry dough and then freeze it and save it for when I needed to make a new pie like today I made eighteen piecrusts or if you're wondering about the scones what I do is I make a huge batch of scone batter and then save it in the fridge and then when I want fresh scones well all I do is pull some out and throw in walnuts or what-have-you I make ten batches of say chocolate chip cookie dough and shape it into balls and freeze them and then every morning I just throw a few on a cookie sheet so we have fresh-baked cookies basically I just rotate like this morning I made eighteen piecrusts it's all about rotating almond ganache can keep for weeks . . .

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By the time she finishes explaining everything, we have finished our mushroom soup and our ciabatta. Already we are imagining ourselves standing up, walking to the door, stepping out into the parking lot of the strip mall, getting into the car, going back across the highway, returning to the person who has not eaten anything for sixteen days. Already we are nauseous. The owner's teeth are so yellow. As we leave, she forces us to sample her lemon bar—I sliced it into four pieces, one for each of you! What do you think! What do you think of my lemon bar! The tang flips around in our hot mouths, burned from the mushroom soup.

After lunch, the old people are lined up in the hallway of the Life Care Center. They all sit there in their wheelchairs, baggy around the crotches because of diapers. Some of them stand out. A woman who is bald but for a hundred white hairs. A man whose skin is so pale he looks dead. I can't believe they let a dead man sit there alongside the others! A woman strapped to her

wheelchair with twelve bright orange straps. A woman with an eager smile who says to everyone walking by, Did you bring it today? Did you bring it? A man who is able to ask us, How is she doing? and to whom we are able to reply, She is finally eating again.

Yet these distinctions between the old—perhaps they are mostly imagined. In truth, they are lined up there in the hallway like one enormous, indistinguishable beast that smells of urine and overcooked fish.

Passing them is like passing down a gauntlet. We cannot decide if it is better to avert our eyes or to smile. We cannot tell if they are staring at us or through us. Do they know that they are old and that they stink?

It's like something from a fairy tale: once upon a time, in the castle of the ancient ones. At least this is what we try to tell ourselves.

My sister does not exactly belong here. She is five decades younger than the others who live in the rooms lining this hall. Yet she is retarded enough to fit in. (Please don't use that word. Please don't even think it.) Yet she is \_\_\_\_\_ (handicapped? disabled? crippled?) enough to fit in. Like them, she cannot walk. Cannot feed herself. Wears diapers. Sickens easily. Is prone to fatal pneumonia. Because she cannot talk, we have nothing to await aside from her smiles. This can breed boredom, impatience.

Yet she is magical enough to fit in. Yet she is mystical enough to fit in. A beautiful anomaly in the stinking castle of the ancient ones.

Before she was quarantined in her room, the old folks fawned over her, or so the nurses tell us.

“No parent should have to prepare for the death of a child.”

Once upon a time, a beautiful young woman married a handsome young man. They had a splendid baby girl, but the baby was cursed.

(Why was the baby cursed? Let's say the beautiful young woman had offended someone. But that's not fair—was there any good reason for the baby to be cursed? Come on, work with me here; I'm just trying to tell a fairy tale.)

Here's what happened: the baby girl was born normal—perfect, precious, flawless, adorable, charming, cute, cuddly, lovely, sweet, dear, darling, delightful, beautiful, winsome, bonny—but just before her first birthday, she

forgot the few words she had learned. Her legs went limp. Her eyes crossed. Her hands wrung. Her tongue lolled.

It was difficult to get excited about the offspring that followed.

(A medical explanation, please? Eventually the girl was diagnosed with Rett syndrome. Reye's syndrome? No, *Rett* syndrome. Tourette's syndrome? No, *Rett syndrome*. Like Rhett Butler? Sure, minus the *h*. I've had Rhett syndrome my whole life! So, what is it? A neurological disorder occurring in one in twenty thousand live female births. Only girls? They're born completely normal, then stop progressing. Life expectancy? Unknown. Likely causes of death? Pneumonia—compromised lung function due to scoliosis, difficulty swallowing.)

Now, my husband and I are identical to what my parents were then. Just as beautiful, just as hopeful. *Newlywed*. A buoyant word.

I have no appetite here.

It smells like pee. Your hair smells like pee.

It could happen to us.

We wish to bestow upon my parents a possible night from three decades ago. Make them young again. Put them on our cheap, sun-stained couch. Wrap them around each other. Interweave their fingers. On TV, a black-and-white movie. In mugs, thick hot chocolate. October darkness beyond the window. The warm weight of an Indian blanket.

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Her favorite movie: *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

Her age: 29 years, 26 days.

Number of calories consumed today: 225.

Description of solid waste produced today: One, marble-sized, green-brown.

Description of liquid waste produced today: Two diaperfuls, dark yellow.

At the Vietnamese restaurant, ravenous, the four of us raise our water glasses.

Gloriously we celebrate miniscule miracles: the consumption of over two hundred calories, the emergence of a tiny turd, the upturn of half the mouth in a ghost of a smile.

A spring roll. A vegetable pot. A peanut curry. Brown rice. All so easy to eat. We have no trouble chewing anything and no trouble swallowing it, either.

Then my father says, "No parent should have to prepare for the death of a child."

His head heavy in his hand, his elbows at odd angles on the table.

A glass of beer close to empty. The beer, flat, ungolden, mostly saliva.

My mother loses expensive sunglasses at the Vietnamese restaurant. At a time like this, such a loss should be a matter of indifference, yet instead it contributes to the sensation that soon absolutely everything will be lost.

My husband and I insist on spending the night. My parents must be relieved; this is why we have come, to relieve them. The nurses wheel in a small bed. It has a pink polyester coverlet. We have to wear long sleeves to protect ourselves from the scratchiness of this coverlet. We have to sleep on top of each other. Every two hours, they come in. They check the IV. They make sure she hasn't fallen out of bed. Not that she could. It affords her a certain dignity, that they treat her as though she might be capable of propelling herself out of bed.

*Help:* it seems that the lady across the hall stays up all night just to say it.

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My husband whispering: The sound of your sister's limbs rustling against the sheet. That's the same sound as anyone's limbs rustling against a sheet. In the dark, there's no difference between her and you.

This should be called the Death Care Center.

God it's hot in here, isn't it?

Actually, I'm cold.

The morning nurse says the night nurse said she'd never seen two such beautiful young people sleeping.

My husband and I escape to the grocery store across the highway, where we stand at the magazine rack flipping through shiny magazines, entranced by the glimmering faces of the stars. We have to rip ourselves away.

Upon our return, we pass through the gauntlet of old people lined up in the hallway after breakfast.

There go the young ones, the dead man says.

The others nod; or perhaps they don't. God it smells like urine.

Perhaps it is not so much that they are a gauntlet, but rather that we are a parade.

In my sister's room, the sunflowers have blown over in a midmorning wind. Water all over everything. The floor treacherous. In bed, my sister kind of smiles.

On the TV, the climax of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. *Come on, everyone! Milly—Milly's havin' her baby!*

She who might have been a student, a wife, a mother. She who might have worn something aside from garments that are soft and forgiving. But that's not the way we think. Reserve such regrets for the parents.

Helen! someone is saying out in the hallway. Helen! But this person, thank God, is not talking to me. Helen! Come back! This way! Your room is this way, not that way! Helen glides slowly past the doorway with her walker. Her head stooped over to rest atop her low breasts. She is wearing a tracksuit of forest green velveteen, a material that belongs in a fairy tale. This way, Helen! This way! I am comforted by the kindly, persistent nurse who keeps repeating my name. Bless that nurse, and bless Helen.

My father's exhaustion expresses itself as a bony lump on each shoulder, the skeleton beginning to show through.

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My mother's exhaustion expresses itself via the capillaries in her eyes, which are, quite literally, blood-red.

I wish they were my own two children. I would bake them pies, put them to bed.

Boredom is part of it, too. A half-teaspoon bite, wait forty-five seconds, watch for the swallow. A half-teaspoon bite, wait forty-five seconds, watch for the swallow. An hour and a half for the consumption of two hundred calories. Don't underestimate the tedium.

Walking around the nearby lake, we see two boys throwing rocks at ducks. We see lake grasses that are red, purple, orange. We see a man torturing three fish. There's nothing wondrous in life.

An error in the feeding process could be fatal. The pathways inside her are frequently confused, the muscles of the throat slow to react. Food slips easily into her lungs, where it rots.

Across the highway, a National Historic Landmark. A covered wagon, a homestead. Our shy tour guide barely dares speak a word. In the main room, we run our hands over the huge logs. We learn that originally, mud and

honey were used to seal the cracks—replaced now, of course, by concrete. There are many large stone fireplaces, and an entire room devoted to the craft of spinning wool. I attempt this, like a girl in a fairy tale, gingerly, my foot on the pump and my fingers on the wheel, trying to please the softly smiling tour guide, trying to please my father, my husband, trying to make this day feel normal, delightful, this tour something more than a distraction from death.

Back at the Life Care Center, my mother gets bored.

In the old-fashioned print shop, we come upon thousands of small metal letters with which any book at all could be written.

Once upon a time, there was a magical building where the very oldest people lived. The final ritual in every wedding ceremony consisted of the young couple walking down the principal hallway of this building, which was lined with all the old people sitting in their special chairs. Each old person would bestow upon them a blessing, and the newlyweds would emerge into the dusk, stronger, richer, and happier than before. During the wedding night, their skin and hair would be redolent of ancient urine, and in the morning, they would walk together to the gleaming river where they would wash each other. For the rest of their lives, the fragrance of urine would always remind them of abundance, ecstasy.

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Do we make the old folks envious or joyous? Did Helen ever find her room?

We're not supposed to help them, you know.

They once had jobs and friends. It sounds miraculous, but it must be true. They once wore clothing that wasn't soft and forgiving.

Back at the beginning of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, the eldest brother has just convinced Milly to marry him. He convinced her while she was milking a cow, leaning her cheek up against the warm barrel of its stomach.

My mother says, I've watched the first fifteen minutes of this movie twenty times in the last week.

Our grief is about ourselves. Our own regrets. Our own shortcomings.

As kids, we watched this movie hundreds of times. Soon they will get married; they will ride the wagon up into the mountains; Milly will learn that he has six filthy brothers; Milly will teach those brothers some manners. I

know every sentence in this movie, yet I am not sick of it. In fact, I feel curious about what will happen next.

But we must leave. Plane to catch, etc.

Across the hall: *Help*.

A desire to watch *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in its entirety—regret for not being able to do so—we linger until Milly forces the brothers to remove their long underwear—until she trains them to court girls—until the barn-raising scene, again. The smiley girl may not see me again before she goes, but she will see this movie many times. Suddenly she looks away from the TV screen and stares straight into my eyes.

Suddenly you look away from the TV screen and stare straight into my eyes for seconds on end, absolving or interrogating or thanking or begging or parting. Why are you doing this? You never do this. Your eyes can't focus on anything.

A confession: when we were kids, I sometimes confused your name with the name of the dog. A confession: when we were kids and people asked how much you understood, I said, "everything," as I had been trained, but when I became an adult and people asked how much you understood, I said, "nothing."

Don't worry; I saw the recognition in your eyes when you stared at me. The unbelievable recognition. It left me shaking.

Now you will be stuck here forever watching *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in a darkening room, *help* across the hall, eternally contemplating the scene just after the barn-raising scene, the scene from which I must tear myself away, regret for leaving you manifesting itself as regret for not watching the rest of the movie; in truth, it is harder to leave the movie than to leave you.

What can she do? my husband asked long before he was my husband.

She can smile.

Anything else?

She can cry.

Anything else?

Making it to the doorway, the golden threshold, rushing back.

An immobile girl alone in a darkened room. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in a darkened room. Cheerful song, cheerful song, cheerful song.

Out walking on a faraway dirt road. He and I, side by side. Darkness coming, yet the sky still white, the air still pink. Colors somehow brighter as the world begins to dim. An aster, a horse. A fistful of grass. The expectation of constellations, woodsmoke. Hollow and weary.

In the distance, an incredible creature. As large as a baby elephant, with tan fur like a woolly mammoth. Some kind of magical beast moving through the twilight. Surprise, followed by terror. But this—this thing turns out just to be two people, a man and a woman, walking several paces apart in the darkening world.