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by

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The doctors called it a coma, and they thought they knew what they meant by it. He knew that nobody could know what was behind the word, but it didn't matter. He walked slowly, softly–as if afraid she might hear and stir–into the room, the sweating glass of water in his hand. The curtains of the open window wavered a little, and he saw his garden plot at the extreme end of the yard.

What had been rife with vegetables and bordering flowers just six weeks before was skeletal and unsettling. Already the weeds had begun to take over.

It was only when he noticed the regular ticking of the mantle clock that he realized that the elaborate machines were not filling the room with their rhythms, and then he saw that the red line on one device was a thin, steady stripe with no curves for the pulse. He saw that she was dead because technology told him she was, but he did not bend to touch her or verify the fact. Her eyes had been closed for weeks. He stood in front of the window and watched a small flock of sparrows settle in the persimmon tree. They seemed to compete for what must have been, in their logic, the best limbs. The leaves were all gone, anyhow, and the birds were too few to lend the impression of new foliage. They were just passing activity and chatter. They didn't mean anything.

He walked down the hall to the den and sat in the leather recliner in front of the TV, which was tuned to a soap opera, but with no sound. Ever since his youngest daughter had moved out he preferred the TV this way–on, but mute. All three of the girls–Dara, Darcy, and Mary Margaret–loved the volume up high, just as their mother had. For a moment he watched a man and a woman gesture excitedly toward one another. What they felt seemed amplified by their saying nothing. He snapped them off with the remote control and rose, walked back toward the hollow tone of the clock and the barely perceptible whine of the machinery. He ought to call the doctor or the undertaker or somebody. He ought to contact his son Ronnie, who seldom came home before supper, or call one of his daughters so he wouldn't have to be alone with his late wife. The phrase clung in his mind: "late wife." People were supposed to be disturbed by the peace of the dead, but he felt only a slight numbness and light-headedness. He walked to the window and peered at the severe autumn grass, as if it were a new thing to him. "Damn," he thought. "Damn."

Then he realized that he still held the glass of water. He stared at the uppermost branches of the persimmon and an opaque cloud that seemed nearly as substantial as the moon. He raised the glass to his lips and drank. A car passed on the damp street, and the whoosh of its tires in a pothole puddle startled him. He closed his eyes and pressed a thumb and forefinger lightly on the lids. He turned toward the hall, switched on the light, and left the room.

When Wade Timberly's wife Marjorie died, no one saw him weep a single tear. He missed a week's work for the preparations and the funeral, then was back on the spraying line at Kincaid Furniture on Friday. He didn't shirk or straggle or appear to grieve, and when Les Wilmot asked him how the funeral went, he answered, "It was about the least'un I've seen. Family and 'leven others, mostly folks from the church. Wasn't many flowers, neither. She wanted people to send money to the church building fund. It was in her will. I don't know how much was give in her name." He wiped the sweat from his neck with a kerchief and pulled the mask back down. A chair came down the line, and Wade turned on the stain and pressure valves and filled the air about the dangling ladderback with a polymer varnish guaranteed to last a lifetime.

That night when Ronnie came in from teaching at the community college, Wade was perched on his swivel chair, downing his third beer and broadcasting from his Cobra microphone to any motorist or neighbor who turned to CB channel eighteen. Long ago he had shed the truckers' jargon, and he was talking plain sense: "It's like I told Little Buddy, opening your mouth is a way to bring more trouble into your life. I hold with keeping quiet. If you don't go along with what a feller says, you just give him a silly grin and it don't go no further. You don't, he says something

back and you do again, and before you know it, one of you's got a tire tool in your hand. When Jim Corzine and me was fishing down on the Outer Banks, some fella at the drive-in restaurant pops off about Jim's van, and sure enough they was both getting out and hitching their britches up, trying to look mean when the police pulled in. Lucky thing: Jim's not really mean."

Of the daughters, Mary Margaret was the most critical. She always had been, and she was visibly put out over Wade's lack of visible sorrow. "Daddy's acting," she would allow, "like he doesn't much care if Momma's gone or not. Like he's got no feelings." Mary Margaret had lots of feelings, even if some of them had been bottled up when Jack was an assistant host on the Christian network's late-night talk show. She lived in Florida and had twin sons and a perpetual tan. She said: "He's hard as wood." Said: "He's been drinking pretty serious, and folks *will* talk. Momma would of been ashamed to see him in this crazy state."

Darcy, always conciliatory, reminded her youngest sister that their mother had been dead in deed and thought for almost two months. She was sure he was in a kind of robot-like shock, and that when it hit him, somebody besides Ronnie had better be there to ease it: Ronnie, with all his talk of writing novels and his billions of hours spent watching professional wrestling, which he called "opera with a plot that counts." When Wade would say, "Ronnie, you don't believe that stuff do you?" he'd just leak out his superior chuckle and say, "You try going a round or two with one of them. Try Rick Flair; he's about your age." No, Ronnie would not do in the role of soothing angel because he was out of tune himself, out of step. Nor Mary Margaret, who needed to win at everything too much to support another person's emotions. After all, she had emotions of her own.

Then there was Dara, who was wild. She lived in Wilkesboro with a mechanic for one of those racing teams. She wore tattoos and too much makeup. Darcy adored Dara, who was funny and had great reserves of empathy, but who was unreliable. Her favorite saying when thwarted or contradicted was, "I give a shit," spoken with a jerk of her head and a sneer that said, "care much as I do, I won't fight for it with somebody as ridiculous as you." That was Dara, with you in spirit but never around in the flesh. She had lately developed a fetish for motorcycles and showed up the day after the burial on a borrowed Harley.

"Daddy is just a fool to send more money to that wild thing," said Mary Margaret. "All that money which he and Momma worked hard to set aside. They were going to retire to the Outer Banks and fish and watch TV and eat out a lot, and now Dara's buying drugs and motor oil on Momma's cottage money." She was in a fury, though she hadn't seen her younger sister in nearly a week. Mary Margaret did not require the presence of a culprit in order to conduct a trial, and the verdict was seldom favorable.

The two sisters drank their coffee and shuffled their feet and decided that Darcy would stay on another week to put the house in order and instruct Ronnie on the care and feeding and spiritual uplifting of their widowed father. As if the two men hadn't cared for themselves and the failing mother for months. Mary Margaret went to the kitchen to make a phone call, and Darcy picked up an old issue of *Reader's Digest* and read again the joke about the Irishman who finds a genie in a bottle and orders a bottomless pitcher of Guiness. When the genie reminds him he has two more wishes, Paddy asks for two more of the same.

When Ronnie left for the picture show, Wade began his ritual. He took his accordion in its black case and a pint of inexpensive Virginia whiskey to the corner of the living room where his CB station was set up. He took another sip from the bottle and turned on the power. The device squelched as if in pain, and

he manipulated the dials with scientific care until he knew he was zeroed in to a station. Then he switched on the powerful Zenith overrider and caught four channels, four conversations on his row of monitors.

Gently he lifted the accordion from its case and turned it on. He hummed as it gathered force, then depressed a resonant chord.

"Howdy, out there," he spoke into the microphone. "I know you have things to say to each other, you travelers of the night and truckers and bored people on the hill with the big antennas. This is the first time I've had full power since lightning run in on the old set last year, but I've got it up to where it ought to be now, and I can get my messages through to a whole world. That's good, and all I have for you folks is a song. It's gonna last about six or seven minutes, and then I'll be out of here. I want to dedicate it to the memory of Marjorie, and I guess the song could be called 'Marjorie,' even though she'd roll over if she knew I was doing this. This is Wade Timberly, and this is music for Miss Margie."

It was a beautiful song, and he made it up as he played it. He used all the dexterity and complexity he had picked up from three decades of playing hymns and fight songs and polkas, but he used it to create an almost-transcendent simplicity. A song about clouds and rivers, about wind misbehaving in the trees and a blue heron lifting a fish in its beak. Dunes changed shape in the distance, and trawlers lifted their laden nets against the winter-blurred sun. A grackle lit on a garden trellis. Beach plum blossoms were followed by fruit bright as medallions and not at all sour. Migrating birds arced through the notes. Static from the CB cracked and sparkled, the puzzled voices of late-night listeners seeking information or solace or his attention through the chilling air. He didn't need for them to listen, but he didn't mind. He squeezed the bellows and his fingers danced a courtly dance of life wildly on the worn white keys.

Come Quiet Please

Come quiet please and hold my hand;
Make haste for there is no more day;
The shadows weave a wedding band
Around a cloud of darkest grey.

My lover's gone and left me now,
My love, my dear, my sweetest face,
And now I seek with my own words
To fill that empty hollow place.

My love, he loved me for a time
When I was young and time was strong;
Now silently a leaden chime
Admits he did me somehow wrong.

There's nothing left for me to love,
No heart within to justify,
No thought, no mind, no reason why
And naught but grief left for a sky.

–Barbara Deatherage