Were You Close

Gazing out the sixth-story window, Fay stared at the heavy snow blanketing the hospital grounds. Her warm breath fogged the glass pane, then slowly receded, unveiling the unspoiled canvas below. In the distance, she watched the sunset cross the cold blue sky, seemingly pulling the curtain closed on another January day. The sparkling snow crystals that earlier played in the deceptive glow of the distant winter sun's rays were shrouded in the hush of night. Their glimmers of hope for those inside, swallowed by the frigid dark. With each pass, the grinding scrape of snowplow blades shattered the quiet. Traffic on the usually busy avenue was all but nonexistent as travelers heeded local meteorologists' warnings to stay home.

Inside the stark surroundings of Room 6318, it was peaceful. No TV blaring. No machines whirring. Just the faint rhythm of *Her* breath. As there was no activity or concern about missing a heart-to-heart chat, Fay exited the room and made her way to the visitor's lounge. Surveying the room, she spotted a finger-smudged cup dispenser hanging on the hospital-white painted wall. Careful not to crush it, she gently pulled a Styrofoam cup from its cylinder. Unsure how old the steaming brew was, she lifted the pot and filled her cup. Fay returned to the nondescript room and eased into the unyielding embrace of the Naugahyde recliner, careful not to spill the scalding liquid. Settling in, she wrapped both hands around the cup and let the hot coffee provide a muffled warmth against her skin.

Time passed slowly as Fay sat in silence. As sleep tugged at the edges of her mind, she surrendered. What lay hidden in the recesses of her psyche might sleep uncover?

She was four or five - nighttime - blinding snowstorm - driving - *Her* hands gripped tightly around the wheel - up and down - hill after hill. Every so often, the car in front of them sliding off into an icy ditch, left behind in the rearview, waiting for help's arrival. The memory replayed undimmed by time.

Fay's subconscious clawed at the tapestry of their lives, searching for more. If there was anything, it was buried deep, hidden behind a door she could no longer open.

As her inner chaos quieted, thoughts began to settle, and Fay's nervous system calmed. She remained in solitude when a gentle tap landed on her shoulder. A nurse, dressed in classic Snoopy print scrubs, stood beside her. Her eyes said everything. She leaned in and whispered, "I'm afraid she doesn't have much time. Is there anything you'd like to say?"

Plenty, Fay thought, but the questions were too many and time, too short. Quietly, the nurse exited, waiting just outside as Fay stood watch over the faint rise and fall of *Her* chest. The time between each breath grew longer than the one before until there were no more.

The nurse returned. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she said. "Were you close?"

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