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DYING LIGHT

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It's a Sunday afternoon in early May. Bud McMahon, who's eighty-one and dying of esophageal cancer, has been to church with his wife, Annie. Friday they went to the clinic, where they were given the diagnosis. Tomorrow they have an appointment with a surgeon, but they've been warned there is probably nothing the surgeon can do. Now McMahon's sitting in the living room with his son, Web. Annie's in the bedroom resting. But McMahon knows it's not just that. She wants McMahon and Web to talk, just the two of them. She hopes that now, at last, they'll learn to get along.

McMahon has always had problems with Web. He's never been the strong, stoic son McMahon wanted. He's smart; he teaches painting and art history at the university. When he was young, he wanted to be a real painter. And maybe he could've been, maybe he had the talent. McMahon doesn't know about that. He just knows that Web's cynical about it now. About what little painting he still does, about the students he teaches. And he's been married for nearly twenty years to a successful woman, Ellen, who despises McMahon. They've chosen — Web and Ellen — not to have children. They had their careers; Ellen's a psychologist, some kind of therapist or counselor, and neither of them wanted to sacrifice that

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for children. *Careers*. They didn't talk about their *work*. They talked about their *careers*.

McMahon knows that Web's here now because he wants to get things said before it's too late. Web's had a breakdown. He had an affair with a student. (One of many, probably, McMahon thinks: Web's always been attractive to women young enough and dumb enough to mistake his weakness for wisdom—or at least sophistication.) Ellen, who had probably been looking for an excuse for some time, ordered him out of the house. Web then drank and drifted his way into a depression that ended up with him playing Russian roulette by himself in the middle of the night. (Or so Web had said. McMahon doubted there'd been bullets in the gun. The empty-gun suicide attempt, that would be Web. All self-pity, no risk.) He took sick leave from the university. He was just out now, after spending a month in a high-dollar moon ward called Harbor View. McMahon knows what kind of advice he would've gotten there: Go to the root of the problem, talk things through with your father. Using the kinds of words McMahon had heard Ellen use. *Closure*, that was the one he hated most. Well, if that's what he wanted now, all he had to do was wait a few months and McMahon would be dead. Real fucking closure. But Web's not the kind to let it go at that. He'll have to pick at the sores. And on account of Annie, McMahon will have to let him do it. It irritates McMahon. His son, he thinks, was lost to him a long time ago. Why should they kid themselves about that now, either of them, just because McMahon is dying?

Just now, Web looks like he might get up out of his easy chair and leave. He doesn't know what to say, how to start. McMahon can see that. He gives Web a little more time, then says, "The Braves are on the TV, I think. You want to watch?"

Web perks up, as if that were the cue he's been waiting for. "I'm thinking about making it up with Ellen," he says. "I think she'll take me back."

Well, Christ, of course. It's the way of the weak, always going back to the suffering they're used to. "You want that?"

"I think so."

What can McMahon say to that? It was a terrible marriage, Web's and Ellen's. For the last seven or eight years, Ellen has been sick with something or other all the time. She'd get so bad she couldn't breathe. But the doctors never could find out what it was. They said it was psychosomatic. McMahon thought she was allergic to Web. She'd be better off without Web. If she stayed away from him, she'd probably never cough again. And, God knows, Web would be better off without her. Even Annie agreed with that—and she thought divorce was a sin.

"I don't know," McMahon says. "Are you telling me that's what you want to do? Or are you wanting my advice?"

"Your advice, I guess. You and Mother, you're as different from each other as Ellen and I are."

McMahon can hear Annie moving around in the kitchen. "That's right. Your mother and me," he says, "we were as different as daylight and dark. I drank and cussed and roared around. I wasn't happy when I got out of the navy. I thought I would be, but I wasn't. I was hard to be around. You know that. But your mother, she waited it out. She stuck by me. It was part duty that kept her by me. Religion. Fear of God. But I don't think even that would've been enough. So it was love too. She's always loved me. I don't know why. I didn't deserve it. But that's what it was."

Web looks at him. He seems a little confused. "What are you saying then? You think we should stick it out too? Ellen and me? That it's our duty?"

"I don't know, son. I never liked Ellen. You know that. Just then, I was trying to tell you to go back to her. But that's just because I thought that's what you wanted me to tell you. But I couldn't do it. Truth is, you were bad for each other, you and her."

"I could change. That could change."

There it is, a thing that has always bothered McMahon about his son. The way he has of seeing weakness as duty. He says, "You asked me, I'll tell you. Sometimes a man's better off with a stump-broke goat than he is with a woman."

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By the time Annie wakes up and finds her way into the TV room, Web's gone and McMahon is watching the Braves. Annie stands in the doorway and leans over her walker. She's looking around the room as if Web might be hiding somewhere. "What happened?" she says.

"He's thinking about going back to Ellen." McMahon speaks loudly, slowly, and clearly. Even with her hearing aids, she's almost deaf. "He's gone."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him not to. I told him they were killing each other."

She stands there for a long moment and stares at him. She's trying not to say what she wants to say. McMahon can see that. She's always blamed him for the troubles they've had with Web. And she wants to blame him now, for this. But she doesn't. She won't. It's one of the things about dying: people stop telling you what they think. They start trying to protect you from life.

"He just wants to know you love him," she says. "That's all."

"I've loved him since the day he was born. I love him now. I'll love him till I die. If he doesn't understand that, fuck him." McMahon believes that's true: He loves his son, he just doesn't like him. Can hardly tolerate him.

"May God forgive you."

She steps back out of the doorway, pulls her walker to her, scoots it around so it's at her side, turns into it, and lurches, precariously, angrily, away from him.

McMahon turns his attention back to the TV. Maddux is pitching against the Mets. This is what McMahon wants to do now, watch someone do a hard thing as well as it can be done. Someone who has to work with a very small margin of error doing something that, in any real sense, makes no difference whatsoever.

He tries to concentrate on the game, tries as if he were the catcher, Bako, to call the pitches and the location before they're thrown. He's good at this. He knows the game. But today his mind won't be diverted. It returns to Web. He'll be back, sooner

or later, McMahon tells himself. His father is dying. Guilt will drive him back.

Guilt. You get down to it, he thinks, maybe that's all that holds us together, all that makes us a family. Maybe guilt's all that can come to you when you see that your love hasn't been strong or pure enough.

"There's nothing I can do," the surgeon says. He's a man in his fifties with a strong round face. His hair is gray, and he has a thick mustache that still has some red in it. His eyes are a clear blue, and McMahon likes the honest way they hold his gaze. This is not one of those doctors who looks down at his charts when he has something hard to say. This surgeon is a man he can trust.

"I want you to cut it out," McMahon says. "Or try to, anyway. If it don't work, I'll die on the table. Clean."

"Mr. McMahon . . ."

"Only problem I got now is I can't eat. Food won't go down, just lumps up and comes back. All I expect you to do is go in there and clear a path. That's all. I like to eat." He glances at Annie, who was in her youth the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Now she's old and confused. He's sure she hasn't heard anything that's been said. "It's the only pleasure I got left."

The surgeon, still looking straight at him, opens his hands, a gesture of helplessness. "Mr. McMahon," he says. "I'm a surgeon. It's my nature to be direct. You understand that?"

"It's why I'm talking to you."

"Yes sir. I see that. So what I'm telling you is that with this kind of cancer—esophageal cancer—by the time we find it, most of the time it's too late to operate. I'd go in. I'd find that it's spread. I'd close it up. And you'd be way worse off than you were when I started. You'd suffer more and die sooner."

McMahon nods once, then looks at his Annie again. "What did he say?" she asks.

"Says he can't do anything."

She looks at the surgeon, who has swiveled on his stool so that he faces her now. "That's right, Mrs. McMahon," he says in a loud, clear voice. "Nothing I can do."

It seems to McMahon that Annie's eyes, made bright by a film of tears, look almost young again. Jesus, he thinks, what will happen to her? That sweet woman.

He gets up and walks over to her. He stoops and places his hand over her elbow. "Well, Annie," he says, "I reckon we best be headed home, let these folks get back to business."

"What?" she says.

"Home," he tells her.

"There are things we can do," the surgeon says. "Sometimes radiation helps."

McMahon doesn't respond until Annie is on her feet and balanced, her little claw-footed metal walker in one hand, his elbow in the other. Then he looks at the surgeon and says, "Cure me, will it?"

"It might give you more time. It might let you eat a little."

"What's the odds?"

"I'll make you an appointment with Dr. Johns. He's the specialist."

McMahon gives him a half-grin. "First one you dodged," he says. The surgeon smiles, shrugs. "Odds are good it'll give you a couple more months. Might let you eat a little. Eggs maybe. Even that's a long shot."

"Eggs?" He laughs outright. "Well, fuck it then."

"Donald!" Annie's the only person on earth who calls him Donald. "You have to do what he says."

He looks at her, surprised that she's heard.

"I mean it," she says. "You have to."

He turns back to the surgeon. "My Annie," he says. "You make the appointment. I'll think about showing up. We'll split it up that way. All right with you?"

"The girl at the desk, she'll give you a time."

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He pulls in at the White Spot on the way home. "What are you doing?" Annie asks.

"We're going to go in here, and you're going to order yourself one of their burgers with the fried onions on it, and I'm going to get me two of them, like I always have, and we're going to eat." He says this at such volume that the man getting out of the truck next to them turns and looks.

"You can't eat," Annie says.

"I can die trying," he says.

He helps her out of the car and lends her his supporting arm, and they make their way slowly inside the diner. He orders and then tells the waitress they'll need a pitcher of water. "And bring it now, you don't mind. Got to get the skids greased."

He and Annie don't talk while they're waiting for the food. He'd have to talk so loud that it would be like making a public speech. McMahon would like to say something, tell her maybe that he doesn't want to go back to the clinic, doesn't want to let strangers decide how he will spend the little time he has left. Or maybe he would just talk about how much he's always liked these little burgers, the thin patties, the fried onions. He can remember when the place opened, back in the '30s. The first time he ate here, he was home on leave from Korea. The hamburgers were twelve for a dollar. The man who ran it then was the father of the one who runs it now—that man there, flipping the patties and wearing the white T-shirt that has JOHN 3:16 printed across the back. And, hell, this man, the one here now, he must be sixty. Christ, it comes and it goes. They give you a little time in the sun, and then they drag the darkness down.

He reaches across the table and lays his right hand atop Annie's left. She stares at their hands for long moment, and he knows she's trying hard not to cry. Then she looks up at his face. She leans forward, touches his cheek with her free hand, and tells him she loves him. He nods and says he loves her too. She can't hear him. He knows that. And maybe he should say it again, loudly enough so that she—and everyone else in the diner—can hear. But he doesn't.

Instead, when she takes her hand away from his face, he takes that hand too. And he holds it. And as he looks at her then, he thinks how old she is, how frail, how weak.

When the food comes, they move so the waitress can set the plates down. Annie folds her hands in her lap and lowers her head. He watches her. Grace. She's never doubted that.

Of course, he can't eat. Nothing gets down. He goes to the toilet and gags up the bite he tried to swallow. He returns to the table and watches Annie eat her burger. She does it without appetite. A duty.

McMahon believes in nothing outside of this life. Not really. There may be some kind of God, but He doesn't pay much mind to any of us. World War II taught McMahon that. He'd been on two ships that had been torpedoed and sunk off the coast of North Africa. He had floated in an ocean full of dead men. Who lived and who died—it had all been shit luck, cold chance. But he's glad now that he went to church with Annie almost every Sunday of the forty years since he retired from the navy. Maybe that will let her see him as one of the redeemed. Maybe that will be enough to get her through.

He tells himself that next time he'll try to do better with Web. He owes it to Annie. Pretty soon, Web will be all she has.

It's a twenty-mile drive from the White Spot to their old white hillfarm house. McMahon drives and wonders how long he'll be able to do that. When they pass the county hospital, he says, "That's where Josie was born. She was the only one of us born in a hospital." Josie was the youngest of his nine brothers and sisters. They're all dead now. He thinks about how they died, each of them—and where. All but two of them died in a hospital.

It's a bright afternoon. The middle of May. The trees are lush. There are flowers everywhere, bursts of color in every yard. As they pass the veterans' cemetery, he's tempted to stop and sit for a while on one of the benches near the ground he'll be buried under. But he decides that would worry Annie, and he drives on.

When they get home, he gets out of the car and helps Annie. As

they're walking, he looks over her head at his garden. The tomato plants are already thigh-high. "Well," he says. "I reckon a man's still got to tie up his tomatoes."

McMahon is right. Web does come back. He's with them now in an examining room at the clinic, and they're listening to the radiological oncologist. He's a small, neat, soft man who speaks in a low, smooth voice. McMahon decides there's no point listening to this man, much less talking to him. Here he is, this doctor, surrounded daily by the dying, and he doesn't know anything but to lie.

"It's terminal, you're saying, this cancer?" Web asks the doctor. The radiologist offers Web a solemn nod. "Here at the Hooper-Krock Clinic," he says, "we don't believe in terminal illness." He smiles.

Web rocks back a notch. "What?"

"We have to remain positive," the doctor says. "Attitude is everything in a case like this."

"In a case like what?"

"Like this," the doctor says. "Life-threatening."

"But not terminal? He won't die."

"We can't say that. But we can't give up."

Web looks at McMahon, who shrugs. He's a little tickled by this, McMahon is. After all, it was Web who persuaded him to show up for the appointment, Web who told him over and over again that he couldn't just think about himself, that he had a family, that he owed it to all of them to let the doctors do what they could. That he owed it to all of them not to give up.

"No point in this," McMahon tells Web. "You looking for straight answers, and this man, he's a fucking radiation salesman."

Web laughs, a big, loud, good laugh. McMahon likes that. It's one of the things he's always liked about his son. He says, "I let's take your mamma home."

But then the doctor changes. He gives them a brisk, clinical assessment of what the radiation might do. It can't hurt anything,

and there's a fair chance it could help. It's a statistical certainty that it won't save McMahon's life. An extra two or three months, that's what they're talking about. A little time. "It won't make you sick, not the way it used to. We've gotten much better with that. You might lose some hair. You might feel a little weaker during that time. But you'll just have to come over here once a week for a month. Then it'll be over, and you'll feel better for a while. I can't say how long."

"What did he say?" Annie asks.

"Two or three months," Web says. Then he raises his voice. "He says the radiation might give Dad two or three more months."

She turns to McMahon. "I want those months," she says. McMahon nods. "My Annie," he says.

A week later, Web's back. The three of them are in the living room in the old farmhouse. McMahon is sitting in his recliner. He's not wearing a shirt. He took it off to show Web the blue cross at the top of his chest, just below the neck. It's the target for the radiation machine. Just yesterday, McMahon had his first treatment. Web sits at the end of the couch nearest McMahon. Annie's on the couch too, at the other end. Of course, she can't hear anything that's being said. She just looks at one or the other of them every so often and smiles. As long as Web and McMahon are talking without raising their voices, Annie can hope they're making up. McMahon knows that. And he's decided to try. He'll talk to Web. He'll listen. He'll do his best to understand. He won't say anything hard, even when he thinks it's the hard thing that needs to be said. They have finished talking about the radiation for now, and Web is telling McMahon that he and Ellen have talked. They've decided to take some time and think things through. She wants to be sure. She wants Web to be sure. She doesn't want them to make the same mistake again. They need to wait.

What they're waiting for is for me to die, McMahon thinks. But he doesn't say anything. And, Christ, who knows? Maybe his death is what they need to make their marriage work.

Web's waiting for him to say something, so he does. He says, "That makes sense to me. There's a lot of pain there. You want to go easy."

"Too much, maybe," Web says. "Too much. I don't know." He leans forward on the couch. He looks down.

McMahon wants to tell him, *Buck up, be a man, cut her loose*. But he doesn't. He doesn't say anything.

Web looks up, sits up, shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he says. Here you are with cancer, and I'm complaining about my problems."

"Hell, death's easy," McMahon says. "Nothing you can do about it. But you now, you got choices to make, one way or the other."

McMahon watches Web think about this. "There've been times," Web says, "when the thought of death has been a solace to me."

It sounds like a line he's rehearsed. This isn't the turn McMahon wanted the talk to take. "Ought not be," he says. "You're way too young and smart to be looking for solace. There's too many other things to try."

Web nods. "Painting," he says. He looks toward the front window as if there might be something out there he could paint. Then he looks down at his lap. Then he looks up at McMahon. "When I understood how good you had to be at it to make it matter, I quit trying. I got scared. I played games with paint, but I never painted." He nods again. "That's what I've decided to do now. I'm going to paint."

McMahon wonders whether that's something Ellen told him, or maybe the moon-ward doctors. But "Sounds good to me," he says. "It's what you've always wanted to do."

"Yes. Yes, it is." He hesitates, and McMahon can feel an edge in the air. "Look," Web says. "I haven't talked to Mother about this. I know what she'll say. She'll say yes to anything I ask. And then you'll say yes. For her. I don't want it to happen that way." He stops again.

"Want what to happen? Say yes to what?"

"I want to paint you. I want to move in here—for a while, anyway, the rest of the summer, maybe. And I want to paint you."

Now it's McMahon who doesn't know what to say.

"You must think I'm some kind of vulture, asking this. And maybe that's right. I don't know. I just know I want to do it."

"And if I say no?"

"I won't mention it to Mother. We'll go on the way we are."

"You think you can stand living here?"

"If I'm painting, I can. This matters to me. You, me, the painting. Even if I can't do it, I'll know it mattered. I won't be able to kid myself anymore."

"Well, all of us, you know, we're good at finding ways of kidding ourselves. No matter what."

"Not about this," Web says. "I know the difference between a real painting and a fake one. For a lot of my life, I've wished I didn't." He gives a half-nod to help make the point. "Look," he says. "If I fail, it'll be an honest failure. I promise you that."

"Well, then," McMahon says. "I can't say no to that."

Web moves in two days later. He sleeps in his childhood bedroom. It's still got the old twin bed in it. The same pine desk he used in high school is there too. There's an end table and a lamp on one side of the bed, a window on the other, a cheap chest of drawers against one wall. Otherwise empty. It looks like what it has been—a room no one uses.

Other than his painting, drawing, and writing materials, Web doesn't bring much. A few changes of clothes, the necessary toiletries, a couple dozen books. He says he'll do the cooking and cleaning, drive Annie to the grocery store or Wal-Mart or wherever she needs to go, and do whatever McMahon wants him to do in the garden. He wants to help, he says. He doesn't want to be any burden.

He offers to drive McMahon to the clinic for his radiation treatment, but McMahon says there's no need for that. Not yet. He'll drive himself—and Annie, if she wants to go—as long as he can. Helplessness will be on him soon enough, he says.

And so they settle in.

The radiation doesn't cause McMahon any real problems. He doesn't even lose any hair. And he enjoys the weekly drives to the clinic with Annie. He keeps the window down, the air conditioner off. He likes the sun, the movement, the way memory seems to enter the car with the warm wind.

They don't talk much during the drives. He's fine talking to Web or most anyone else. He still tells stories to whoever comes by the house for a visit, anyone who can hear. But if he says more than a sentence or two so that Annie can hear them, he can feel a strain in his upper chest, can feel what he calls the termites in his throat. Sometime before he dies, he'll probably lose his voice. The termites will take it. He knows that. If you look at it one way, it's funny. An old man who can't talk, an old woman who can't hear. A marriage.

Six weeks go by, and McMahon loses thirty more pounds. He's down to 160 now, 50 pounds less than what he calls his living weight. He's getting by on juice and broth and Ensure. Once in a while he manages to choke down a little yogurt, but it's not worth the trouble. "Hell," he tells Annie, "you go to all that trouble, it's still yogurt." He still hasn't lost any hair—or not enough to be noticed, anyway. The radiation therapist tells him he's lucky, almost everyone loses some hair, and a lot of people lose it all. "Hell, me," McMahon says, "I got hair with a positive attitude. I'll keep growing after I'm dead."

McMahon is so weak he lets Web drive him and Annie to the clinic every Tuesday. A couple times a week Web also drives Annie to the Superstore, pushes her up and down the aisles in a Wal-Mart wheelchair and helps her pick out groceries and toiletries. Nights, Web sits with McMahon in front of the TV and watches the Braves. Sometimes, Annie sits with them. Now and again McMahon catches her looking uncertainly, hopefully at him or Web. Usually, though, she falls asleep after an inning or two.

One night McMahon's in bed asleep, and then, just like that, for no good reason, he's awake. He feels an absence beside him. Annie's not there. He raises his head a little and sees her kneeling

against her side of the bed. He looks at the nightstand clock. Nearly three o'clock. He lies there on his back, watching her, tears in his eyes. He knows what she's praying for. She's been praying for it since Web was a teenager. She's praying that her husband and her son, the two people on earth she loves, will learn to love each other.

McMahon's on morphine now, and he spends most mornings sitting calmly in the sun. He takes his paper and his coffee on the back porch, sits in the old high-backed, split-cane rocker, and stays there until nearly noon. Most mornings, Web is out there with him for the first couple hours. He begins by taking photographs of McMahon from different angles and distances. He uses two cameras, one for color, one for black-and-white. When he has taken his photographs, he sets up his easel, places his sketchpad on it, and begins to draw. All this photography and drawing—and, even worse, the apologies Web keeps offering—bothers McMahon. He doesn't want Web out there—doesn't want anyone there, not even Annie most of the time. He just wants to sit on his own in the silence and the sun. And this . . . well, this seems so, what? Scientific, or something. Some kind of experiment Web's doing. It would be just like him to think that if you did everything just so, followed the right set of rules, gauged the light and the shadow perfectly, you could figure death out.

The first few drawings each morning are quick, rough sketches. Web finishes one—or gives up on it, maybe—tears it from the pad, lays it facedown on the floor, and starts the next. As the morning goes by, Web devotes more and more time to each sketch. He'll sometimes spend an hour on the last one. When he finishes, he puts all the morning's drawings in a folder, carries the folder to the porch swing, and sits there for a while. He and McMahon talk a little then, or try to. Neither of them knows what to say. It's very awkward. Web makes the silence that surrounds them seem unnatural.

At the end of the first morning, McMahon asks to see the last drawing. But the request makes Web dodgy. It takes him several

nervous minutes to explain that the drawings aren't ready to be seen yet—he's still getting his eye, his touch. It has been so long, he says, and it will be a while longer yet. This seems so painful to Web that McMahon lets it go, and nearly three weeks go by before Web carries a morning's final drawing to McMahon and holds it up before him. McMahon is surprised by how much he likes it. You can see death in every line of the face, but a dignity—or maybe just the memory of a dignity—remains in the eyes and the mouth. McMahon looks at Web. He understands that his son has made him an offering, an offering he has worked hard to make right. "I forgot how talented you are," McMahon says. "An awful thing for a father to have to say. But it's true. It's something you have that has nothing to do with me. So I forgot about it. I'm sorry."

There are tears in Web's eyes. McMahon watches him control himself. He appreciates the effort. He thinks it would be wrong for either of them to let the moment go soft on them. They'd lose its truth that way. So he gestures toward the drawing. "A man like that at a time like this," he says, "you know what he wants?" He looks up at Web. "A cigarette." He cocks his head, nods once, smiles. "You do that for me, son? Go get me a pack of smokes?"

There's a confusion on Web's face, but then he lets out a little laugh. "You serious?" he asks.

"Camel straights, son," McMahon says. "God's own."

Web is back in fifteen minutes with the Camels and a black Bic lighter. "Been fifteen years," McMahon says. "Got to where I had bronchitis about two-thirds of the time." He taps the pack sharply against the arm of his rocker. Then he opens it and takes out a cigarette. He looks at Web and offers him one. Web takes it without hesitation, clearly pleased to have been asked. With the Bic, McMahon lights first Web's cigarette, then his own.

He coughs once, then again. He's dizzy for a moment and a little queasy. He lets his head and stomach settle before taking a second drag. Much better. And the next drag is better still. He holds the cigarette out and studies the burning tip. "By God," he says, "I've loved these sons of bitches."

Web laughs, that good deep laugh.

And then they begin to talk, light talk but real, about smoking and quitting smoking.

In the days that follow, Web continues to start their morning by taking photographs, but now he's painting after that instead of drawing. Some days he works five or six hours without a break. McMahon is content to sit that long and longer. Sometimes he thinks he could just sit there day and night until he dies. Often now Annie comes out on the porch and sits with him. They rarely say anything. She watches Web paint, and McMahon can see pleasure on her face. He knows she thinks her prayers have been answered. It's funny, McMahon thinks: All they needed to become a family, the three of them, was a killing cancer, a steady supply of morphine, and, on Web's part, about thirty years of failure.

One evening McMahon and Annie are sitting at the kitchen table. Annie is eating a bowl of chicken noodle soup and a pimento-cheese sandwich she bought that afternoon when Web took her to the Superstore. McMahon's having his Ensure, which Annie has poured into a fluted glass. The stuff looks like Pepto-Bismol. McMahon wishes it tasted as good. He'd rather be in the den watching the game, but he does this for Annie. He has gagged about half the Ensure down when the front door opens. McMahon hears Web walking through the living room and dining room, talking to someone. McMahon can't make out the words, but he knows who the other person has to be. And he's right. When he turns, he sees her just behind Web, in the doorway. Ellen. They're dressed up. Web's wearing a wheat-colored jacket, a tie. Ellen's in a nice blue dress. Good-looking people, for their age. They should've had kids.

McMahon looks back at Annie. She's intent on the soup. She still hasn't heard anything. He says, almost yelling, "Annie. The kids are back."

She looks up at him, then turns and raises her gaze to take in Web and Ellen. "You all sit down," she says. Her chair jerks backward. I'll get you some . . . some supper?"

McMahon holds up his glass of Ensure. "Got plenty of this. Buy it by the goddam case."

Web goes to Annie, puts a hand on the back of her chair, bends down and kisses her on the forehead. "We're fine, Momma. We've already eaten."

"Oh."

McMahon looks up at Ellen. "Come on in," he says. "Sit down." She does. Web sits across the table from her. There is a silence. McMahon doesn't know what to say. This is the woman Web has loved and hated and can't get over, the one who has marked him for life. Maybe he ought to just live with her, do the suffering face-to-face. McMahon takes a sip of Ensure, sets the glass down, shakes his head. "Cure you of wanting to live, this stuff. You get done, you got to lick a dog's ass to get the taste out of your mouth."

Web laughs, but Ellen merely smiles politely, tolerantly. "It's our anniversary," Web says. "We went to Bella Italia over in Ft. Smith."

"You bring me a sausage?" McMahon says.

Web smiles, says nothing.

"How long's it been?" McMahon asks. He looks at Ellen, then back at Web. "Which anniversary, I mean?"

"Thirty years," Web says. "1971."

McMahon nods. He lets them watch him think about the thirty years. "You're back together then?"

"We don't know," Web says. "We're talking."

McMahon looks at Ellen.

"We want to be sure," she says. "Sometimes I think we were all ways wrong for each other."

McMahon shakes his head. "No such thing as being sure," he says.

"You and Mrs. McMahon," Ellen says. "You're sure. Anyone can see that."

McMahon cocks his head as if in surprise. "Me? Annie? Oh, no." He gives a short nod and a half-smile. "I been married fifty-eight years." He lets the smile broaden. "To the wrong woman."

She laughs. It's a nervous laugh, unsure of itself. But she laughs. "Piece of wisdom," McMahon says. "Only one I got to pass on to you. You fall in love, and then sooner or later you going to find out it's to the wrong woman—or man, your case. Question is, what do you do then?"

"What's he saying?" Annie asks Web.

"He's telling Ellen about marriage." Web enunciates the words loudly, slowly. "About you and him."

"Lord have mercy," she says. And then she laughs.

Two weeks later, on a Wednesday, McMahon loses his voice. The cancer is in his larynx. He can make himself understood if the listener sits close and leans forward. But it's all breath, little rushes of air. And he's in his wheelchair almost all the time now. He can walk no more than a step or two. He has to have help in the toilet, in the bathtub. He needs more and more of the morphine.

Web is still taking pictures every morning and still painting too. He's finished three portraits, but hasn't been satisfied with them. McMahon doesn't think any of them is as good as the drawing. But he's in a morphine haze, and, like everything else, his eyes are going. So he doesn't know.

Ellen hasn't been back. Web says they're still talking, still thinking. They've hurt each other a lot. They still don't know what they'll do. McMahon suspects that whatever they do they'll be sorry. Sometimes that's the way it is.

In the evening Web wheels him out on the porch. Annie joins them. Web begins saying the things he needs to say—that he loves McMahon, that he's sorry he hated him so long, that he's going to keep painting, that he'll paint as well as he can, do honest work, that he'll take care of Annie, that he'll always do that. McMahon listens and nods. He reaches over and touches Web's arm. Web takes the hand and holds it. He quits talking. McMahon is staring at the sunset. "Annie," he says. But there is only the forcing of breath, no sound she could possibly hear.

Still, the sky—an old glory of dying light. It is beautiful. It is almost enough.

He knows he will not see another.

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