

P. A. WRIGHT

I awoke in Mom's house. The Atlantic ocean's surf pounded the sandy shore a half-block away. The nonstop ritual began long before I was born and will continue long after my ashes dance in the winds of time. If there was comfort to be found there, it escaped me.

There was work to be done, blame to be accepted, indifference to experience, and no chance of avoiding abuse. The assisted living spokesperson arrived at one o'clock and Mom had to be somewhat presentable.

After a few shots of OJ, I took my pills. Take your meds: live a long life. Live long enough to be a pain in the ass to your kids. Though I have no offspring, I vowed to be a pain in someone's tuckus after I admitted growing old.

"Mom," I said with zero compunction after I'd traversed the house to her adopted bedroom off the kitchen. "You have to get up."

"Go away!" she bleated.

The bedroom was smallish, about a third the size of the master. It smelled. She lay in the pajamas that she'd worn for the past three days, not snoring, not sleeping, just slowly dying.

You don't realize what a moment really is until you're confronted by one and there's no doubt you've reached a mile-marker you can't understand or fix. I stood in the enormous kitchen with my back to Mom's bedroom. My fingers rubbed my forehead. There's no training for this. You can read books till you're blue but until it's your parent bitching at you, accusing you of plotting to put them in a home, of needing you so much it terrifies them, it's all theory.

I fixed myself some lunch, I don't remember what. There isn't much I know beyond the routine: Put food in front of Mom. Watch it sit there till long after the first glass of wine. Turn the TV down when she falls asleep. My heart was breaking in ways I had no idea it could. My wife came downstairs. I thanked God she was with me. Could I do this alone? Maybe, but Mom's needs scrape my insides raw and my wife's the only person who can apply the salve.

Here's the piss: my dad died years ago, long before they were done enjoying new friends and neighbors. Mom joined the Wacky Widows Club and partied for over a decade. Then, like a stone skipped on the water of a calm lake, she sank into a depression she couldn't escape. She was done.

What do you do in that situation?

The assisted-living spokesperson's visit went as expected. Mom was sober, wary, and steadfast in her refusal to budge from being "on the cusp" of moving into a home. She reclined on the beige sofa that was her throne, heard the woman out and said she'd think about it.

The plastic goblet in her hand wiggled immediately after the lady left.

"Pour me some wine, please."

I did, knowing she'd crawl further into the bottle as the sun crested the sky and sunk into the horizon. Glass after glass of golden elixir dulling her pain. Food an afterthought. Sitting on the couch watching *Judge Judy* and *The Price Is Right*, and all manner of shit TV. I could say nothing. My hangover prevented me from a coherent argument.

I could barely concentrate with the guilt of enabling her whispering in my ear: "She's got cancer. Let her go."

How do I do that?

My wife and I made dinner. We dined. Mom wined.

I returned to my studio to write. To bleed.

God help me

—P. A. Wright