

A DEAD FRIEND

I bundled up and made my way through the fog to the bus that took me to her bedside. She was so long and thin. The machines huffed and puffed-swish beep-swish beep. The Lilliputians dressed as nurses pulled and pushed and arranged and rearranged the various tubes and bandages connected to her body. I barely recognized her as the same person who had been my friend from so long ago. Should I say good-bye? Or wait to see what happens next?

I remembered when.....

The time we found a \$10.00 bill on the street and fought over it. I was not as generous as you- when the raggedly man suddenly appeared from nowhere and ask if we had money so he could buy a coat you gave him the \$10.00. I said what a waste he is going to buy drugs or alcohol. I don't know if you gave him the money to spite me or that you really did feel sorry for him. We had lunch at the Mexican restaurant and when we left there he was thanking us for the warm coat he had just bought from the salvation army.

Your eyelids move now. I wonder if you are waking up to this mess they've confined to. Your beautiful lashes still so striking and dark fluttering- from what? What are you seeing in your coma? Who are you flirting with in there?

The muses own me---

I remember when you would sing in the cabarets and your voice carried to the streets. Your lovely voice was music to my lyrics. My poetry your songs -only then were we made in heaven. Then came the chorus and the musicians and I moved further and further from the stage. Sometimes you even forgot I was there -speaking past me -beyond me.

The tiny nurses from far away contries-that roll their Rs when they speak have returned to fussed over you again. They have asked me to leave so they can change the waste that comes from your body. There is no dignity in being this ill. The smell from your near lifeless body floods the room and carries to the hall like trails of smoke from a fire.

I can take no more - I leave wrapped in my coat headed for the bus home.

Remembering---

Crossing the street with a child in each hand-you with

yours and me with mine. Back and forth each day from the apartment complex to the park and back to fix dinner for them and husbands. It was so comfortable then. So when did it change? When did bliss become knowledge? We didn't know things would be different did we? We were going to be frozen in time-no beginning no end... Exactly like the nuns told us in school who god was-what heaven and hell were-We rushed our babies to be baptized so they wouldn't be left in limbo. We drag them to church every year so crosses made of ashes could be slashed across foreheads.

I've returned to the hospital to watch you die. I don't feel you anymore. I don't wonder why you haven't called our visited me-when did we stop going places together-when did the laughter stop?

Your children and grandchildren gather around the bed. They let me know the priest has come to perform the ritual for the sick and dying. They whisper- how old I look. What did they expect at my age? I want to pull off my clothes and scream-look closely my dears and view your future!

A year after my husband died and two years after yours left-we sat quietly on my couch listening to music. The kids were gone. The room was covered in empty

shadows. I decided to confide in you... Maybe it was to stir up trouble... Create a volatile energy field- I slept with your husband... I confessed -I had sex with your husband too she said. We laughed and the sun came out through the clouds.

AND

Should I tell the kids?

We made love over and over and it was beautiful until it wasn't any more-no need to be physical or to give it a name or to define or join us. We had no need for descriptions like a botanist in a garden with two names for every plant or doctors with the same labelling only with behaviors and diseases. We grew apart and grew into other friends and lovers.

I slip past the sentry guarding your bed to see you late-- after visiting hours after grown children and half grown grandchildren left. Your face is more anguished than peaceful and the rhythm of the machines keeping you alive are hypnotic. The night shift approaches me and wants to know if I'm a relative. Yes. I have just flown in from Europe and I'm her sister. After all I'm not under oath. Someone looks into it-we were not aware she has a sister Someone said. I looked aghast,-bewildered sitting up straighter in my chair I demanded to know

whose oversight that was? We were left alone for the rest of the night.

Was she still there under all the tubes and hisses and dings?

Now I remember...

Your music was so beautiful. At first you sang other people's songs. I listened in awe. I couldn't believe I was so close to someone with such a powerful gift. I dared to show you my poems and your praise was Nobel and Pulitzer worthy. Our collaboration made us a wanted product all around the towns bistros and cabarets. I sat in front near the stage with a glass of red wine and breathed in your essence. Our songs filled me with odes of joy. I loved you like I had never loved before. We were in the here and now for a long time or maybe not long enough. Can you hear me? My friend--you are so close and so far away. I see you sinking into the next world.

I'd drifted off to sleep while resting my head on the edge of the mattress. When I awake the sun is shining through the window. You had left this world while I slept. The nurses are pulling tubes from orifices attached to your unmoving body. I put my coat on and walk out.

Someone follows me and wants to know how I feel-- if I

**am all right. I feel fine - she's dead and now I'm going
back on the bus and have breakfast at home.**

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