

FORTUNE

My husband's spine arches like a cat's against the back of the kitchen chair. Slowly, he takes off his glasses, rubs his eyes. I watch, held breath as he bobs and lists in the armless chair, his PB&J sandwich, his sudden favorite, before him on the table. He won't even take a sip of water.

“That guy [his aide] poisons my water,” he claims.

Bernie's stubble is gray on his graying face.
He can't shave, won't let me shave him.
Strings of drool hang from his lower lip.
His mouth caves in as if he's toothless.

When I was 14, in the darkened penny arcade,
I put a nickel in the slot of the fortuneteller's booth.
The lights switched on. The wooden lady with the
cracked face and faded satin dress, a collar of
yellowed lace, jerked to life.

“Will I marry Bernie?” I asked.

Her jointed wooden hand made a twitching arc over
a tarot spread. Her head moved back and forth
before she slid her answer through the slot.

“A smile is worth a thousand frowns,” her card had said.

BERRY-PICKING

I watch my husband rip apart a bag of frozen blueberries that roll into the freezer bin, and onto the floor, his slippered feet squashing them—splotches of berry juice on the tiled floor and in the grout. Like the blood my father saw running between the cobblestones of his city with the statue of the Tsar.

My husband spent five months in a “care facility” where he was allotted invalid portions. My food packages disappeared. I couldn’t visit because of Covid. Like Romeo, I stood on the sidewalk waving up at him in his second-story window, his face, wraithlike.

“Don’t bring him home,” doctors warned.
“He’s a fall risk, addled, helpless. He could set a fire.”

He taught himself to walk again with a rolling walker, but he forgets the word *scissors* or what he did a moment ago. What he doesn’t forget is hunger that stays on his skin like a blue tattoo.

Now I berry-pick in our kitchen, whisking berries from the dark beneath the fridge with a yardstick. While I mop every drop of berry blood, I miss my husband as he was when we knelt, thigh to thigh in the strawberry patch, pushing aside the crowns of tooth-edged leaves with their silky under-hairs to reach close to the roots, twisting the stems gently to get the berries off.

DOWNPOUR AND THUNDER

I write in my bedroom with a combo lock on the outside knob that my husband can't figure out, no matter how close behind me he stands to watch me key in the four numbers. My house is 24/7 inhabited by aides, male aides—my husband threatened a female aide with scissors to her neck.

Last night a female had to fill in for the male aide who got a heart attack. While I was sequestered in my locked room with a rain and thunder app playing loudly (sounding like 1,000 flushing toilets and something vaguely gastric for thunder) I heard a scuffle. Like a merwoman in an aquatic tank,

I swam toward my door, palms groping the wood which became a pane of glass, but my body stayed in bed. This morning, when I turned off the storm, my husband was gone. I learned he'd slapped and kicked the female aide who called for help. They took him away to an address unknown to me, and I don't want to ask.

Once my husband had leaped in front of me when a car was about to jump the sidewalk. He had pushed our car up an icy hill when it stalled with me inside so I wouldn't get cold, wouldn't get wet.

I am writing with my door open, sunlight from the tall windows pouring into the hallway where I can walk with loud footsteps. I write to keep my door open.

COUNTRY LIFE

Buying this ample ranch house in the country, I dreamed I could rescue you, my husband, from the nursing home where I couldn't visit you because of Covid, where you were starved, quarantined in your room. Who knew that apart from the stroke caused by open-heart surgery, you would be diagnosed with Lewy body dementia, which creates delusions, paranoia? Who could guess that all the knives and scissors would have to be hidden, that all the doors would require inside and outside locks so you can't escape to beat up the old fellow across the street who you are convinced is an enemy?

I pictured us sitting on the patio, side by side, my hand on yours as we looked out at our garden of flowers mentioned by Shakespeare—columbine, chamomile, cowslip, daffodils, larkspur, poppy. How I roared at Stratford-upon-Avon when you, with your fat, bee-stung lip, slurred— *Haply I think on thee, and then my state,*
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate,
then you whistled a spluttering jumble of notes that made me open my umbrella.

Now, sitting beside me on the patio, you jam my chair against the house, jarring my arm, trying to get closer. Who knew my dreams would be broken by you in the hallway, lunging your body against the front door, bellowing, "Let me in, Let me in."

Pastoral

My love, your hearing aids amp all sound— my words lost to you in the honk of geese, the sough of wind tossing the trees. I hold onto the backrest bar of your walker. The vibrations from its wheels on cracked macadam travel up my arm like the tremble I felt the first time we touched.

I WANT TO WRITE A POEM

I will not let this poem reveal
the long scar, still red and raised
on my husband's chest, surrounded
by graying curls, nor
his ropy arms blooming with blood.

I want to write a poem about him running
ahead of me on the beach, the green kite
we bought at Woolworths bobbing in the cloudless sky
and me chasing after him, laughing,
a poem that notes his size
fourteen footprints in the sand,
and shows him spinning to face me, running
backward lithely like a winged god.

I will not let this poem
reveal his trembling right hand nor
the lid-droop of his left eye
nor smell the sourness
of medication in his sweat, nor hear the chirp
and buzz of his hearing aids.

I want to write a poem about him
holding our newborn daughter in the palm
of his hand, and pacing with our colicky son,
patting his back, my son's face rising
above my husband's shoulder
like a pocket mirror of him.

I will not let this poem reveal
my husband leaning as he walks
as if he's a pine tree in a forest reaching
toward light, nor the whisper
of his Velcro-closing slippers
on the vined carpet, nor allow this poem
to show him opening the door in the middle
of the night to accept a delivery from Amazon,
his hands holding only air.

MARTY

Wind howls and shrieks like storybooks say.
The neighbor's German Shepherd ululates each
night of my first country winter, my first
without you in fifty-four years.

Each time you phone from the nursing home,
I hear that same old woman in the background
singing the same off-key song from the sticky
ratchet of her throat.

*Don't repeat yourself, I beg when you tell me, over and
over: Marty has been my best friend since high school
and we both married Rockaway girls the very same year.*

I know. I knew you since high school. I
went to Marty's wedding with you. We
danced to their wedding song— *The
First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*.

You were so tall then, your dark curls thick.
The wind has lost its breath. The
neighbor's Shepherd skulks
around his rimed yard.