NIGHT VIGIL

Sleeping lightly, expectantly, I rise slowly from the sofa at the sound of wheezing through the darkness. I step over to give him a hand with sitting, standing, straightening the oxygen tubing, and shuffling to the commode perched beside the rented hospital bed. "Sitting on the pot," he calls it. The pot stands high. Easier to get on and off. Made even higher by a three-inch thick foam donut cut out by a grandson to cushion his grandpa's bony bottom.

Gasping for air, a fish on a riverbank, he sucks in deeply four puff mists of medicine from inhalants he holds in his hands. Between breaths, he explains "Three puffs on the blue. One puff on the brown. Always the same." Finally, his breath debt repaid, he settles into the seat and lets go a stream of urine into the plastic pot suspended below.

I settle into the rocking chair facing him, our knees nearly touching. Even in the dim light, I see the hospital half-gown drapes loosely over his frail frame. His dentured smile seems to have grown as his body has shrunk.

Unable to wear his glasses, blind in one eye, he sees only my silhouette a shadow on the periphery of his left retina. We sit like this for the next hour, talking softly, briefly into the quiet place between us.

During the long easy silences I am wondering if he knows he is dying. If he is afraid. We talk about the family, people who have come to visit. About seeing his newest great grand daughter tomorrow. More silence.

He asks about the time. I tell him the time.
He repeats the time.
Names each digit separately,
as though saluting their individual dignities,
"Three-Two-Five."
then,
"Oh boy. We're half way there."

Dan Merritt
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