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The Reprieve

Susan S. Lara

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The Reprieve

SUSAN S. LARA

THE IMPERIOUS RINGING of the telephone seemed to make the darkness vibrate. But Leo woke up seconds before the first ring; through the years his body had evolved an almost unerring way of scenting a coming emergency: pins and needles on his hands and feet had always given him ample warning before the first blow. He turned on his right side to reach for the receiver. His hand fell with a dull thud on the night table, and almost at the same time he heard Edna's voice, clear and crisp as though she had not been asleep, speaking to the caller.

Oh, yes, the memory came to him now, with the all-too-familiar sinking sensation that had already become its twin: Edna had transferred the phone to the night table beside her on the day he was brought back home from the hospital. Any one of those emergency calls could bring news that could occasion another stroke, she had said, pretending not to have heard his objections.

His wife now began talking in that soothing-and-bantering tone she often assumed with patients — a tone that told them that their sufferings were not singular, that awful things did happen to people, too bad, but that very often they turned out right in the end. That tone, her patients often said, was better than any sedative.

"All right now," she was saying, "don't panic. I don't want to be saddled with two patients when I get there. I'll bet she'll be just about ready for a two-mile jog before I leave the house. . . Well, okay, but you probably need Valium more than she does." She put down the phone, noiselessly getting out of bed at the same time. Snatching the blue-collared white dress from the hanger beside the bed — she'd made it a habit to take one dress out of the

closet before turning in at night — she addressed herself to the more immediate business of saving a life, with a casual efficiency that for some reason pulled Leo's insides quite awry. With a slight movement and a grunt he let her know he was awake, and that she was still with him.

"That was Leila," turning on the light, she answered his question before he had time to formulate it. "Her mother's having chest pains again. I'll make sure everything's all right. I won't be long."

"It's past midnight. Maybe I should go instead," he said, in a voice that failed to convince even himself.

"Don't be silly. You can do that later, when you're better. I know you're her doctor, and I'm just a poor substitute, but she just has to put up with me until you get well." Nicely put, he thought, but it did not dilute the curd of pain that was threatening to block his throat.

"I'll be all right, don't worry." She gave him a perfunctory kiss — her lips were cold, and hardly moved as they touched his cheek (when did these things begin to matter to him?) — and walked towards the door after a quick look into her medical bag. As she paused at the threshold to look back at him and switch off the light, he noted with a dull ache how young she looked, how so much like a school girl in the starched whiteness of her dress. His wife was a beautiful woman, and, like everything he owned, built to last.

"Going somewhere, Ma?" Sandy's voice, just emerging uncertainly from boyhood, drifted from the other room. "I'll drive."

"It's not far, Sandy, I'll drive myself. Just . . ." A passing car muffled the rest of the sentence, but it was clear even to Leo: *just keep an eye on your father*. It made him feel excluded somehow, and in his mood of cantankerous unreason he felt he wanted to weep.

Columns of light swept the ceiling as Edna backed the car out of the garage. Leo heard Sandy's very solicitous, very grown-up "Take care, Ma," and the scandalous clanging of the gates as Sandy closed them. He made a mental note of that — have to oil the hinges — and tried to go back to sleep. After a while he opened his eyes again. Why was it that even trying to get some sleep exhausted him so?

The bed creaked as he sat up. In a minute Sandy was at his

door, eyebrows puckered.

"You need anything, Pa?"

"Just a glass of water," Leo said, giving his son an indulgent smile.

"I'll get it, don't get up."

"For God's sake, it's only a glass of water! Stop acting as though it's a monumental task only you can do!" Leo turned away as soon as he said it, but not quickly enough to miss the pain that dimmed the young boy's face. For a minute he concentrated needlessly on putting on his slippers. When he looked up again to say he was sorry, Sandy had gone back to his room, slamming his door with a vengeance. That's more like it, Leo thought. Now the boy's beginning to act his age again.

How swiftly had the boy vaulted the fence between boyhood and manhood. Leo knew he should be grateful for that — had hoped for it, in fact, since his son went into high school. But now the transformation came so soon after his stroke, he couldn't help thinking his illness was the pole the boy had used to vault the fence. He suffered a stroke, and the following day Sandy started acting like a young father. The boy was now a head taller than Edna; the difference was just right to make it comfortable for him to rest his arm on her shoulder when they walked together, a sight that did not help restore Leo's own sense of indispensability. Sandy had even picked up the habit of rumpling his mother's hair in a teasing mood, an avuncular gesture that somehow did not go well with his angular gait. It was Sandy now who made sure everything was all right before turning in at night; who got up in the dead of night to see what some strange noise was all about. Edna herself had torn to tatters the cloak of over-protectiveness she had wrapped around her only child for a long time. They had now become partners, working cheek by jowl to make sure Leo wouldn't have another stroke.

At no other time was this more evident than yesterday, when he insisted on driving, for the first time since he was discharged from the hospital. What had come over him, what had made him plunge into recklessness, a quality quite untypical of him, completely unworthy of his profession? He had only meant it as a joke, he remembered now, at least at first. They were just leaving his sister's house after one of those occasional visits meant to reassure her that he was doing just fine. Amidst domestic murmurings between

his sister and her husband, Leo heard Edna and Sandy fighting over the driver's seat. It was a perpetually recurring argument: Edna's caution made Sandy impatient, while Sandy's impetuous swerves set his mother's teeth on edge.

"Why don't you settle this thing by letting me drive?" Leo had said, and was about to laugh, when he saw the amusement in Edna's eyes. He said it again, this time in all seriousness, and saw the amusement dim into disbelief. Before the disbelief could darken into terror he turned away and quietly took his seat behind the wheel. From where he was he could hear Edna and Sandy still debating, this time on who should take the front seat. He felt the blood rush up to his head. "For Christ's sake, I'm not a maniac, I'm not a madman, why doesn't anyone want to come with me?" Edna slid beside him without another word. He turned away as she quietly fastened her seatbelt — a precaution she used to be too lazy to take — but his sister's face, puckered with worry, was more unbearable. He turned back to Edna, "Where's Sandy?" he asked as he fumbled for the ignition.

"He said he has to borrow some notes from Rex; they have an exam tomorrow."

"We can take him there; it's along the way."

"Oh, let him go on his own. He probably wants to stay there awhile."

His wish to argue was quenched by the almost childish excitement that driving gave him. He had been in the backseat far too long, he thought. He looked at the westering sun that seemed to perch gingerly on top of a bungalow, but as his eyes passed the rear-view mirror, he thought he caught a glimpse of his brother-in-law's red Cortina, following him but tactfully keeping distance. A second look told him that Sandy was driving. Leo tightened his grip on the steering wheel. What did that boy take himself for? The new messiah? The sudden surge of anger and his impatience at a slow-moving Beetle in front of him made him tempt Providence: he stepped on the accelerator, changed into fourth gear, overtook the Beetle, and only then saw the oncoming truck. It was the other driver's nimble foot that saved them from a sure accident: Leo's own legs, from the knees down, felt heavy and cold as if they were encased in plaster. He chose not to hear the truck driver's tirades, and continued driving at an even pace as if nothing had happened. Edna stayed quiet beside him, her eyes still on the

road, unwavering, almost unblinking, as if her vigilance could somehow make up for his weak reflexes, his feeble grip.

It angered him, this sudden plunge into ineptitude that made him bungle like a toddler, except that his bumbles were not cute at all. It angered him more when he remembered his mortal antipathy towards bunglers before. Wasn't it this rooted dislike for clumsiness that caused his stroke in the first place?

Nothing in the events of that day had told him that it was going to end differently. It only seemed like one of those extremely trying days when one of those overworked, badly paid nurses in that understaffed hospital kept handing him the wrong tools during an operation. Dusk had fallen when he came out of the operating room. He walked back to his clinic; it was way past his consultation hours, it was time to go home, but he was tired, and he didn't look forward to forty-five minutes of stop-and-go driving at that time of the day. He sat down behind his desk to write an overdue report to the hospital administrator. After a while he noticed that the sheets of paper he had been clutching with his left hand had dropped to the floor. He wondered how they could have slipped out of his hand without his noticing it, when intense giddiness suddenly hit him like a gust of wind. He saw the room spin, then darken. He tried to hang on to the edge of his desk which seemed to be moving past him, but a frightening pain had begun to throb where his heart used to be. He reached for the phone, dialed 0 for the operator, and asked her to connect him to his residence.

"Edna," he said, "I feel a little giddy. Just go right ahead and have dinner with Sandy. I'll drive home after some rest." The room whirled again after that; shapes and colors lost their distinctness and merged into one another, then he was pulled into a menacing eddy of darkness.

It seemed hours had gone by before he heard voices again that seemed to come from another planet. . . cerebral thrombosis. . . blood clot had formed in the internal carotid artery. . . not enough blood reached the brain. . . the poor thing, he was about to butt in, but his tongue felt heavy, pinioned to his palate, and he realized they were talking about him, before he sank again into darkness.

Edna, her face drawn and sallow, sprang up from her seat as soon as he came round. "How do you feel now? You were so

lucky. The operator went to your clinic as soon as she made the connection, and found you unconscious, slumped on your chair. Can you imagine? If she weren't so sensible, you would have stayed there all night, and God knows what we would have found in the morning." She chattered on, the words all coming in a rush, not giving him any chance to reply, as if in fear of what the sound of his voice might tell her if he began to speak. When she paused for a while to catch her breath, he smiled. "Hey, you've lost your bedside manner." Relief flooded Edna's face. His speech was a little slurred, but nonetheless he could make himself understood. He still felt as though he had had too much to drink; he had a sort of scraped vulnerability to light and sound, but his eyes had acquired an unusual clarity, and he noticed everything with the exaggerated attention of one who had just bought a brand-new pair of eyeglasses.

"If I had not managed to reach the phone, I should have been done for," he said with a delicious shudder. He was to repeat that sentence with obvious relish and recount the incident countless times to his visitors, with the same love for detail that he had noted in his own patients, and which had amused him. With each retelling his narration grew; he would add a new detail that he had not included in an earlier version. His visitors listened patiently, uttering the stock phrase quite obligingly, with slight variation, before leaving: "Take it easy now, Leo, you're still quite young!" He laughed. "Seems ages since the last time I heard that. This stroke wasn't so bad after all."

The novelty of his situation wore off in a couple of weeks, and fewer visitors came. His irascibility came back, and their house was filled suddenly with scowls, black looks, and unparliamentary language. And, more privately, even tears. They'd even stopped going to parties, which he'd grown to hate. He sulked in one corner while the aging and infirmed clustered around his wife for those free consultations which had seldom given him pleasure before, but which he now missed, and sought, in a strangely wistful way. When people did talk to him about their aches and pains, it was not to seek reassurance from a doctor, but to feel comfort in a shared and common lot, to diminish the sense of isolation that sickness brought on.

The past offered little consolation, but he had taken to reopening it like a beribboned box of sepia-toned souvenirs. He remem-

bered the times he had been lucky to be able to grab a sandwich between surgeries. Those times now seemed part of prehistory, almost mythical, as remote as they were irretrievable. He had been dispatched unceremoniously to the background, reduced to relieving common colds and coughs. A more miserable position he could not imagine.

A sudden downpour hit the roof and lashed the walls like a battering ram. Leo sat up with a start and was surprised that he had fallen asleep while wallowing in a morass of self-pity. The digital clock told him it was 5:37. Had Edna really been gone that long? He'd hardly finished the question when the 7 dropped giving way to 8, which was eventually pushed down by 9. The clock's precision was merciless, admitting no equivocation. What was taking her so long? What could have happened? A jumble of images that knew no logic came to him. Edna being held up, the car breaking down, an accident . . . the disjointed visions rained down on his resentments and melted them, and in their place came anxiety. My God, don't let anything happen to her, he thought, and as soon as he realized he was praying he couldn't go on. It was if he had come face to face with an old friend he hadn't seen in a long time, and to whom he had so much to say he didn't know where to begin.

Waiting was unbearable; he had to move somehow. He stood up, not really knowing where he planned to go, just moving his limbs brought some relief, then felt a familiar pain at the back of his neck, and the very familiarity of it pained him. An incipient stroke, he knew the symptoms too well. He went back to his seat, slowly, and remained seated very quietly, breathing gently, considering himself. Then, very tentatively, he tried moving his left hand. It crawled on the tablecloth like a cautious spider. Gratitude enveloped him like sunshine, lifting the fog of melancholia that had filmed his brain and choked his heart. What was it that he had wanted so much? If he couldn't even remember it now why had it seemed so important?

He heard the car pull up before the driveway, the engine purring. Before he could think of standing up Sandy rushed out of the room to open the gate. "So you've been waiting up, too?" he said, companionably. He remained sitting until Edna's figure dimmed the doorway.

"The old woman's gone," she said, "I'm very sorry. We took her

to the hospital, but she died in the ICU. It was a massive cerebral hemorrhage."

She sat down opposite him and went into the details. The rain had let up as suddenly as it had come, leaving only a damp earthy smell. Dawn had softened the darkness into a powdery blue. Looking past Edna and out the window, he could already make out the patches of growing paleness here and there.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," Edna said as she stood up. "There was no time to call."

"Oh, don't let that worry you," he said, and felt strangely as though he were addressing himself, too.

The rays of sunshine streamed in, speckled through the dwarf coconut tree in the backyard, dappling the walls with lights and shadows as Edna puttered around the kitchen. Beautiful, Leo thought, although it was just an impression before it became a conscious thought. When did these things begin to matter to him, he asked himself, wondering almost at the same time why the question sounded familiar. But he didn't let it bother him, and just thanked the gods for the day's modest alms. Perhaps even a mouse, he thought, between a cat's swipes and jabs, might be thankful for a reprieve to appreciate the softness of its tormentor's paws.