

## Charon

“I’m a dead woman,” she tells me.

I press my fingers to the warm flesh of her wrist. “Not yet, you aren’t.”

It’s probably the wrong thing to say. No one ever taught me how to respond to *that*.

Lucky for us both, she laughs. Her pulse rises to greet me, stubborn as a bucking mule.

“Don’t listen to that,” she quips. “It’s a liar. Never been anything wrong with my heart.

That much is chugging along just fine, at least.”

She offers up her neck with a good-natured smile while I feel her lymph nodes.

“They told you what I’ve got, didn’t they?” Her rich Southern drawl rumbles up through my skin.

They did. The attending physician had fed me the summary before sending me in to collect the rest of my data alone. *Interesting case for you!*

“ALS,” I answer dutifully.

“It’s a horrible way to go,” she tells me, as if I don’t already know. I guess I don’t – not really, not the way she does. I know books and flashcards. I know standardized questions. *A 62-year-old woman presents to clinic complaining of right hand weakness and difficulty walking. On physical exam, the left lower extremity is hypertonic with a positive Babinski sign. What is the most likely diagnosis?* I know the story of my mother’s family friend, the artist who one day found she could no longer hold her brush steady. There’s a photograph in a dusty drawer of her cradling me as a baby. I have no memory of her embrace, but one of her paintings still hangs in my parents’ living room: a rolling field rich with verdant grass and broad trees smudged as though in motion, their leaves trembling before the promise of a summer storm.

I push these images aside and make a low noise that I hope conveys sympathy.

“Sorry. I know you’re just a student,” she says, sensing that she’s flustered me. “But, well, you should get used to this.”

“Mm,” I coo, and reach for the reflex hammer I still can’t reliably wield.

The rest of the encounter is blessedly mundane. At the end, she waves and wishes me good luck with school as she crosses into the lobby.

“Have a nice afternoon,” I call to her out of habit. I will spend my drive home wondering whether those were the wrong words, too.

Months later, I have yet to be sure. The woman I met that day was not my first patient with a terminal diagnosis, and she certainly won’t be the last. Now that I’ve left the hushed lecture halls of my preclinical year behind, death is no longer just text on a page or an option on a test. Less and less am I afforded the comforts of fiction and theory.

*You’ll learn to manage it, our instructors told us in advance. You take a moment, if you need. Then you move on with your day, because you have to.*

*Remember: there are still lives to be saved!* This was supposed to encourage us, of course. You can’t stand at a podium and talk about a thing like mortality and not chase it with some sugar.

But they didn’t tell us the whole truth: that Death is easier to confront than Dying. Death doesn’t look you in the eye and crack jokes and wince and blame and regret and pray and beg and weep. Death doesn’t schedule a follow-up appointment.

The farther I paddle into my clinical career, the more often I find myself lost. As students, we’re equipped with a compass calibrated by algorithms and diagrams and pithy

mnemonics. Such knowledge is doubtless essential to guide us; but where does the healer's needle land when healing is impossible?

In order to gather my bearings, I've had to adjust my perception of physicians. Like Charon, the mythical ferryman of the Greek underworld, a doctor's duty is not only to guard the shores of life, but also to help carry souls from one world to the next when nothing else can turn the tide.

Though my clerkship assignments never took me back to her clinic, I see the dying woman again, and again, and again. Sometimes she is an old man; sometimes she is a child in her parents' arms. Sometimes she arrives with a crowd of loved ones and blessings, and other times she comes alone, her pockets empty. Always, she grasps my hands and asks if I understand her pain.

*No*, I admit.

I don't understand. Not quite. Not yet. For now, I still have the privilege of greeting loss with a professional nod.

So she asks, instead, if I can hear her. If I can believe her. If I can help buoy her across that dark, roiling water, perhaps by faith or humor or rage, but never by apathy. If I can make space to sit beside her on the damp bench while the waves push us farther into the mist.

This much I may vow. And together, we watch the banks recede.