

BEFORE THE END

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“The honest answer is I don’t know,” he had said, after she asked the impossible question. A question that most children ask their parents at one point or another.

What happens when you die?

Something we should all think about from time to time, he thought, no matter how young or old we are.

“But what I like to believe,” he had continued, taking her hands in his, “is that your naai-nai is walking with a quiet smile on her face. She’s been walking a long time, and soon she will come to a door. I imagine it as a sturdy oak door, slightly ajar. She will be much stronger than she was in her last months.”

“She’s in the after-world?”

“Maybe, my darling. That’s how I imagine it, at least. The after-world, purgatory, heaven, nirvana, the astral plane. People give it different names.”

“So she is in the after-world,” his daughter replied matter-of-factly. “And what’s behind the door?”

“That’s a good question. I’m not sure, but the way I see it, is that there will be this great, radiant light beckoning her in.”

“Like in the framed photo in your room?”

“Yes, a bit like that.”

His daughter, Juliet, had nodded thoughtfully, then let go of his hands and jumped out of her bed. He knew she was heading to his bedroom, to inspect that photo.

She would find her mother and younger brother there, reading a book together, and she would tell them both that Grandma, her beloved naai-nai, was growing stronger every day in the after-world and she was soon going to be strong enough to cross into the after-after-world.

Now, almost a year later, he was holding his daughter's hands again. Except this time she was unconscious. Her face appeared calm, and a heart monitor confirmed that her breathing was steady, but one of the doctors had warned him Juliet might never wake up.

A movement outside caught his eye. He turned. Perched on a tree, very close to the hospital window, was a large bird, a type that he had never seen before. It looked like a bird of prey, a cross between a kite and an eagle perhaps, its plumage deep red with streaks of yellow. Like a phoenix, he thought. Life from death, isn't that what they say?

"Good morning, Christopher. How are you feeling?" the doctor asked, entering the room.

"Better," he said, and it was true, but his thoughts were still mostly consumed by his daughter. He turned back to the window and saw the bird fly up and out of the courtyard, its feathers catching the morning sun.

"I can see you don't need the wheelchair today," she said, setting down the tray she was carrying. "That's good."

"Yes."

He watched as she unscrewed a thermos flask and poured them both hot coffee into clear glass mugs. Dr Celeste Peters. She was younger than him, in her late twenties

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perhaps, but she exuded a maturity far beyond her years. He didn't feel at ease in this unusual hospital, but he felt he could trust her.

"Thanks," he said, letting go of his daughter's hands and taking one of the mugs. He glanced around the room, then back at his daughter. It was hard to come to terms with everything Dr Peters and the other doctor had told him. Nothing quite seemed to make sense – neither what had happened to him and his daughter, nor what had happened to the world outside. Yet this morning when he woke up, he had this feeling that maybe, just maybe, everything would be fine... once his daughter woke up.

Yes. And the progress he had made since coming out of a coma yesterday seemed nothing short of remarkable. From hardly being able to prop himself up in bed, to now being able to walk freely across the room. In fact, in some ways he felt in even better shape than before the accident. The back pain he intermittently suffered had not bothered him. He seemed more mentally alert. Most curiously, his eyesight was sharper. He almost felt like he could get by without his glasses, something that hadn't been the case since he had left university about twenty years ago.

"And your Juliet. I can see that her vitals are strong and stable."

"I..." he began, but he wasn't sure what to say. Her vitals are strong and stable. What does that mean anyway? That she's not dead, but also not quite alive?

"She's still in her dream world," he said at last, setting his cup back down. His hands had started to shake.

He looked at Dr Peters. She smiled back. He sipped his coffee. It was rich and sharp. Juliet was going to pull through, he told himself. She surely would.

"The other doctor, Dr Newson," he said. "He told me something yesterday that I didn't quite understand. He said Juliet was both with us and not with us. It didn't seem

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like the most optimistic prognosis. Was it? And what do you think? Is my daughter going to be OK?"

Dr Peters pulled up a chair and sat down opposite him. "Juliet is eleven, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Children's hearts are strong, especially at that age," she said. "They keep fighting, and your daughter is a fighter."

"That she is," he replied, thinking of the time she had bloodied the nose of a bully in her class. That bully never bothered her or her little brother again.

"Still, it isn't straightforward," Dr Peters said, placing her hand briefly on his.

"Nothing is."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean about what will happen next." She paused, choosing her words. "The honest answer is that I don't know. But I believe your daughter is strong, and that she will wake up here stronger than ever."

He pulled away from her, an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu washing over him.

Dr Peters shifted in her chair. "Let me try to explain it better. In terms of our roles. Medically speaking, Dr Prithcart is a neurologist. A good one too. But he analyses Juliet only from that perspective. I'm a critical care physician. In plain terms, that means I monitor everything, not just the brain. And like I said, I can see that your Juliet is a fighter."

Christopher nodded. The anxiety of not knowing if his daughter would recover was still palpable, but he was grateful for Dr Peters words. She had been kind to him from the start, patient as he tried and failed to recall what had happened, gently probing
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but never rushing him. When he had ranted at her and the peculiar Dr Prithcart, demanding to speak to his wife and son, she was the one who had calmed him down before carefully explaining why it wasn't possible to talk to them, given the dismal situation outside.

"I have a proposition. Now, I know you want to stay by your daughter's side. I'd feel the same. But I'm also sure that it would do you good to stretch your legs. You haven't left this room since you regained consciousness."

"Go on."

"Let's take a short walk together after you've eaten your breakfast. The three of us. There is something I want to show you. Juliet's bed is heavy, but it has good, sturdy wheels."

"Isn't it risky? What about all these things attached to her?"

"We won't go far. The place I want to show you is only a few corridors away. Still within the hospital grounds and hermetically sealed. It may help you understand the situation better if you see it with your own eyes."

"Right."

"As for the medical equipment, we can safely disconnect most of it. Your daughter's condition is stable. We only need this tube here for the IV fluids."

"OK," he said. "If you're sure."

"I am. Now have some food."

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Not long after they left the hospital room, Christopher began to truly sense the gravity of the situation for the first time. Until then, it had felt more abstract, theoretical. Yes, the old news footage Dr Celeste Peters had shown him yesterday conveyed the sheer scale of the catastrophe, and her account of what she'd witnessed firsthand had made him shudder. But it wasn't the same as seeing the aftermath with his own eyes.

They had stopped by a large window, the first window they had come across on the hospital corridor outside his room. From there, he had seen the damage wrought. The ambulances and other vehicles outside were wrecked, their windows smashed, their buckled roofs collecting dust. The road leading to the hospital had been largely cleared, but to one side lay a sprawl of mangled poles, advertising boards, and other debris.

The contrast with his and Juliet's pristine hospital room, and the plain but charming courtyard it overlooked, was mind-boggling. How come the hospital remained largely undamaged? The electricity could perhaps be explained by a generator or solar panels. But why were none of its windows broken, the corridors so spotlessly clean?

"Let's go," she said gently. They must have been standing by the window for a good ten minutes. "This wasn't what I wanted to show you. The place I'm taking you to is... more optimistic."

"How did it come to all this?" he asked. From a war that, however severe and terrible it was, had once been contained to his homeland and neighbouring countries; to one that had spread here, to his wife's homeland on the other side of the ocean, and beyond.

"I don't know. There are some things I will never understand. But we are safe inside here. That much I know."

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He looked down at his daughter, lying unconscious and oblivious to their surroundings. She had his wife's mouth and nose, her high cheekbones. But her eyes, hidden for now, were closer to his. A similar grey-green colour, the same mix of two cultures that made him who he was.

Together they started manoeuvring his daughter's bed forward again in slow, coordinated steps, Dr Peters pushing from the head of the bed and keeping a hand on the tubing. She had instructed him to position himself at the opposite end and look ahead, and to keep the bed straight as they moved.

He forgot about the world outside, concentrated fully on the hospital corridor ahead, cautious of obstacles, looking out for anyone who might be coming in the opposite direction. Between the two of them, it wasn't difficult to move the bed, and soon enough they were approaching a sharp turn.

"Slow down," he said, even though they were already moving at a crawl. "The corridor bends to the left."

They carefully turned the bed and entered a new segment of the corridor, one without windows. Bright fluorescent lights lit up the bare walls. At the end of this corridor, he saw elevator doors. They were narrow, perhaps not wide enough for Juliet's hospital bed. He stopped.

"Don't worry," Dr Peters reassured him. "It's safe. The elevator there, or lift as you probably call it," she said, trying to lighten the mood, "is fully functional, like everything else here."

"Right."

But something didn't seem right. He felt a compulsion to see what was behind those doors, yet at the same time a presence inside his head seemed in some abstract

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way to be warning him of a great danger. Then it was no longer abstract. *Don't go*, she said, in a voice that only he could hear. Juliet's voice.

"What I wanted to show you is a couple of floors up," Dr Peters said. "I find it a warm and peaceful place. Somewhere many people here have come to reflect, to put their minds at rest."

He smiled, though his thoughts were anything but calm. He looked down at Juliet, lying unconscious on the bed. Did she somehow manage to communicate with him? No, it couldn't be. But he had heard her, he was sure of that, even if it was just his memory of her voice.

"Christopher, are you all right?"

"Yes. Maybe. I don't know."

"There is nothing to worry about. But we don't have to go, if you don't want to. Really."

He took his daughter's hand. It seemed cold and lifeless. He let go. He knew he should turn back. But the compulsion had returned, stronger than before, pulling him towards the elevator, and he knew he must see what was behind those metallic doors.

"I'm ready."

Dr Peters nodded. They started walking again, soon they were at the end of the corridor and by the elevator. Its doors were narrow, perhaps too narrow. He pressed the elevator button, and heard the lift whirring from somewhere high above, then a ding as the elevator doors opened. There was just enough room. Dr Peters went first, pulling the hospital bed behind her, with Christopher at the rear.

"Press four. We're on the second floor already."

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He did as she said. The elevator shot up in a single fluid motion, and they were there. The doors slid open, revealing a long, empty room with a clear glass door at the opposite end. However, the elevator exit was partly blocked by a wall. He could squeeze through, but there was no way they could bring Juliet in her hospital bed.

“Go ahead. I’ll be right here with Juliet,” Dr Peters said. “You’ll be able to see us.”

He paused, torn. He listened in the silence for his daughter’s voice. But there was nothing. Peering, he thought he could make out vegetation behind the glass door. He heard something. Birdsong.

Stepping out of the elevator, he almost felt like he was gliding towards the glass door ahead of him, and as he did so an overpowering sense of déjà vu returned. He stopped, turned around.

“It’s safe, I promise,” Dr Peters told him, her voice carrying easily across the room.

He nodded and continued slowly forward. The birdsong grew clearer, a warm but solitary call, rising and falling. Then he was standing in front of the door. He opened it and, as he did so, heard a faint hissing sound. In front of him was what appeared to be a small formal garden. There was a single cherry tree, just beginning to bloom, carefully tended flowerbeds, and a park bench. He felt a little lightheaded, but also a strange sense of peace. Looking up, he saw blue sky beyond a clear domed roof.

He stood there, one hand still resting on the glass door. The garden reminded him of a spot in a park he and his wife often went to soon after they first met. No, it was more than a resemblance. The solitary cherry tree, the mix of red and white roses near the park bench – they were the same. But what really made the garden seem almost

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identical was the ornate drinking fountain by the park bench, of a cherub holding a jug above his head.

He went through the doorway, ready to walk over to the bench. But then he saw a bird perched in the cherry tree – red with streaks of yellow, the same type of bird he had seen that morning, quite possibly the very same bird.

He hesitated.

And then he heard Juliet's voice again, stronger now, more certain. *Don't go*, she told him. *It is not time. You must turn back now, or all will be lost.*

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