

Waving Back

All she has to do is hang on, let one difficult breath follow another.

A nurse brings her water in a plastic cup, nudges it onto the locker by the bed. The nurse's name, Carrie, is written in felt-tip across the arc securing her visor. The handwriting is rounded, comforting; a school-girl's hand, Helen thinks. She manages a weak smile, lifting an arm in thanks and letting it flop back onto the sheet.

She looks down at her short, scrubbed fingernails, at the small clip squeezing her index finger.

'I meant to say – your rings are safe,' the nurse says, following Helen's glance, her voice unnaturally loud behind mask and visor. 'And I've spoken with your daughter. Miranda, isn't it?'

'That's right.'

'A lovely name.' The nurse pauses to check a monitor, turns back. 'She sends her best. And your husband's well by the sound of things. He sends his love, too.'

Sending his love! You're improvising now, Helen thinks. Max would never say that, he loathes platitudes. And Miranda wouldn't pretend he'd said it, either. But the nurse's words are kindly meant.

From across the ward metal rings screech as curtains are whisked round a bed. The nurse steps closer. 'Perhaps you'd like to use some headphones for a while? Some soothing music?'

Helen glances across to the curtained bed. That poor man, she thinks. Much younger than I am.

'Yes. Yes, please,' she murmurs.

It comes to her, when she next surfaces, that it hadn't been a bad life. But she had one regret. There'd been no one to remind her, in those early years, when the boundaries of life didn't feature in her thinking, that each decision counted.

The events of the last seven days remind her of a poorly-rehearsed drama. That cough, and Max forgetting his walking frame as he made for the kitchen dresser, grabbing their old, mercury-filled thermometer, putting it in her mouth. Miranda arriving. The sense of increasing powerlessness that first irked her, then frightened her.

Helen looks up. The shift has ended, and a male nurse has taken over. 'Stavros' is written on his visor. He carries an air of calm, seeming to pick up on Helen's enquiring gaze, introducing himself, telling her his parents live in Thessaloniki. 'I try to get back when I can,' he adds.

Greece, she half smiles, thinking back to a honeymoon fifty years ago. She'd like to ask more but she's tired with a lethargy that's crushing, a fatigue entirely different from the tiredness of youth. As she closes her eyes, pictures return. Max walking beside her as they explore the ancient hills and olive

groves of the Epirus. The sunlight catching the pretty diamond hoop, which she hadn't yet got used to, as she lifts her hand to push back her hair. That trip to the River Acheron.

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The river flowed swiftly, rushing round the rocky obstacles near the shore, its banks muddy and steep. A group of people stood in haphazard line, looking around. Helen guessed their reaction to the place was the same as hers. *Is this it?* No one was trying to get across.

Max was striding along the bank. She followed him, picking up a savoury aroma carried on a passing breeze. Plump cobs of corn, bronzed and charred, were laid out on a makeshift stand under an ancient sycamore. One or two people were purchasing.

'I'm amazed we found it,' she said, catching up with Max, her hand reaching for his. 'That map!'

Max laughed. 'Sixty per cent accurate. But it got us here.'

'You got us here.'

'Journey to the River of Death.' Max grinned, easing his rucksack from his shoulders. 'Isn't there some myth about a ferryman rowing dead souls across? Not sure if it was the Acheron, though.'

'It's Charon who's the ferryman. And there are four rivers. Of the underworld, I mean. The Acheron, the Styx... Can't remember the other two.'

Max flung his walking staff to the ground. 'How about we go across? Defy our demons.'

'Won't we be out of our depth - out there in the middle?' Helen stepped forward, inspected the rocks under the bank, glanced across to the opposite shore.

'We can find out for ourselves.'

'Anyone would think you're still in class.' Helen said, laughing. '*We can find out for ourselves,*' she repeated, exaggerating his earnestness.

Max shrugged. 'You chose to marry a geography teacher. So what if I sound like one?'

Helen watched for a moment as Max rolled up his shorts, unlaced his boots. She never tired of contemplating his broad shoulders, his long face, his height. She'd noticed other women doing the same.

'Right. I'm coming too.' She tore off her socks, lacing her boots together and hanging them round her neck.

Already Max was easing himself down the bank with the help of the staff he'd bought at a market in Parga.

The water was shockingly cold to her bare feet, the larger pebbles near the bank were covered in slime. Each step was an experiment. Will I slip, will the force of the water knock me back? As she moved her foot forward, with the shallows behind her, she felt the strength of the current challenging her progress.

She paused for a moment. Max was wading onwards, increasing his lead. The water was up to her thighs, her shorts sodden. Stepping forwards, she slipped on an uneven pebble, wobbling, and righting herself.

Then, above the deafening rush of the water, a man appeared by her side. Thirties, dark glasses, but all she really saw was the hand he held out towards her.

In that instant she realised what the audience on the shore must have seen: Max pushing ahead with his long legs, his shepherd's staff, his strength. He was nearing the opposite bank now; he hadn't looked back once. She felt a rush of embarrassment, half-turning to the stranger beside her. 'I'm fine,' she mouthed. 'Really.' Dark glasses smiled and stepped away, heading slowly back.

Helen paused. Max was already ashore, kneeling on the opposite bank, drying his legs. The stranger's concern was strengthening her resolve.

I'll do it on my own, she thought. I'll get there.

Another slippery pebble, another foot forward.

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From the top of the bank, she threw down the boots that had been strung round her neck, the warmth of the afternoon sun catching her cheeks. Max lay on the grass; stripped to the waist, eyes closed. An Adonis.

This man has no feelings.

The thought paralysed her. What kind of man had she married? He hadn't lent her his staff, checked her progress, helped her up the bank. At that moment her anger was subsumed by a stunned self-pity, then fear of what might lie ahead.

Numb, she turned and gazed back at the opposite shore. The scattering of people were still there: the corn-seller, the ragged line of visitors with nothing to do.

Then she saw a hand raised in salute, waving to her. Dark glasses had been looking out for her, he'd noticed.

She smiled, waved back.

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Could it have been as much as fifty years ago? It comes to her that every detail of the memory, that moment of recognition, had been imprinted on her brain.

I'll do it on my own.

She'd learned independence, had learned it all her married life. She had set up an employment consultancy, built it up to a staff of eighty, made wise investments, earmarked her successor well before her retirement. Not so long ago she'd prided herself on learning how to put up a shelf, just for the hell of it. Then there was their daughter, Miranda; well-adjusted, determined, now safely off their hands.

Max's self-containment had had its advantages. She might have turned out very differently had she not been partnered by Max.

The double doors open. A new patient has arrived; slack shoulders, labouring chest. A woman half her age with wild hair and blotched cheeks. She's swearing, her arms flailing. Helen watches as three gowned figures cluster round the wheelchair. One slips away, mobile phone in hand; another checks and fixes monitors; a third places a gloved hand on the patient's arm as she addresses the woman, nodding some words of reassurance that Helen can't hear. The love shown on the ward astounds her: protective, anticipating pain, smoothing over the cracks.

Watching them, it comes to Helen that, for all her achievements, she'd never loved Max as she'd expected to do when she first embarked on married life. She'd never cared for him with the generous, unconditional love she sees around her. The unspoken balance sheet had always been there: *I provide the lion's share of the income; Max does the domestic stuff.*

She recalls a day ten years ago, her very last day at work. Arriving home she'd casually dismissed the dinner Max had cooked. Hadn't he guessed there'd be a big retirement lunch for her, she'd asked. A presentation? It was only the next morning she'd found a loin of pork, stuffed and rolled, in the fridge, a Cherry Clafoutis in the larder. It was the meal they'd shared in Nimes, years ago, celebrating her first promotion.

There had been times of connection, of course. She recalls the long weekend in Riga Max had organised for their fortieth anniversary. Secretly, she'd double-checked, suspecting Miranda's hand behind the operation. But Miranda had taken no part in it. It had surprised her.

I've dressed up my behaviour as a laudable independence of spirit, she thinks. I've made a carapace to protect myself. I've rationed our love, limited its possibilities.

Her chest feels tighter than ever; heaving with each breath. Will I go first? she wonders.

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When she wakes, she finds that a mask envelops her mouth and nose; she can feel its pressure on her cheeks. She's lying on a trolley watching the ceiling tiles flash past. Double doors open and close.

There are new sounds now: a soothing hum, overlaid by tuneless bleeping. Somebody speaks, but she's too tired to grasp what's being said. The bright lights hurt her eyes. She closes them.

She's standing in deep waters. Her feet are heavy, she can hardly lift them. The current is strong; she tries to resist its forward pull, feels herself wobbling on the stones underfoot. The far shore is dim, but she can make out two figures sitting on the bank in the distance. It's mother and father; they've gone on ahead.

But what about Max? I need to speak to him, she thinks. So much to put right. I can't leave him yet.

She senses someone beside her in the water. It's nurse Stavros, offering her a hand. She takes it, holds it fast. Her feet are cold, so very cold.

I need to turn you, the nurse says.

Gently the hand leads her round, and slowly she lets herself be turned, until she's facing the shore she's just left.

I must hurry, I need to get to Max. She wants to say this, but her mouth won't open.

You're doing well, the nurse says.

Sure enough, she's approaching the shallows. The water is warmer now, it's easier to move.

Wait for me, Max, she wants to shout. Please wait for me.

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She opens her eyes and blinks. The lights around her are strong. The clip is still on her index finger, and Nurse Carrie is sitting beside her, speaking to her. She's holding out a phone. On its screen she sees a man with stooped shoulders and a fine head of hair, leaning on a walking frame, his large hands planted on its rubber grips.

Slowly, he raises his right hand and waves to her. 'Sending you my love,' Max says.

She can't speak but her heart is full. Still anchored by the monitors, the finger clip and its connecting lead, she finds the strength to lift her hand and smile. Wave back.

Rosemary Guilding

3rd Place in the Short Story Category

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