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w r i t e r • f i l m m a k e r

A well-rehearsed death

by

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Death was imminent, and William Ellison was a man who liked to be prepared, always prepared. In his eighties, it did not come as a surprise. The news that he might only have a few months to live came swiftly, expectedly. He had not felt well for some time, and he had been suspicious. So when the doctor walked in with the results, William made it look like it did not faze him.

His wife knew otherwise. He did not have long to live and now it was something they were both aware of.

"This is it, says the doctor," said William to Ruth in their kitchen. "This is the big one."

Before Ruth could respond or take it in, William said to her:

"And you know what that means. Rehearsals start tomorrow morning, bright and early."

The words would have confused Ruth had she not known her husband so well, for so long. Just as the news of his death had not surprised him, this business of rehearsing did not surprise her, although she was curious to know exactly what he meant by "rehearsals."

The next morning she found out. She had just awoken, her sagging skin cold, her thinned bones creaking, wanting to warm up. In the darkness she groped for her robe on the door, and behind her, from the bed, there came a loud, raspy, cough-like growl.

William, completely under the covers, moaned and groaned miserably, the old, old vocal cords tiredly resounding. She looked at the bed, putting on her robe, and he, beneath the sheet, did not move, did not move at all.

He moaned again, gave out a long exhalation, and Ruth approached the bed. She pulled down the sheet from his face and there laid William, very still. He seemed not to breathe, his chest not moving; his mouth was shut tightly. Ruth pulled down the sheet a bit more. His hands rested on his chest, his fingers entangled. She looked at his face again and saw the expression changing. William, playing dead, had a very subtle smile on his lips.

Ruth looked at him, at this man she had married so many years before, and breathed out slowly, whispering something. She whispered the same thing two more times, inaudibly.

William opened one eye. "What was that?"

Ruth looked at his white, wrinkled, still handsome face, at his rosy lips, at the mane of gray-white hair. She put her veined and bony hands on his, on his chest, and again said she loved him.

The morning after that, there was more of the same. Ruth woke up earlier than William, as usual, and William rehearsed. He lay on one side, his blue eyes opened wide, staring at Ruth as she put on her robe. This time, she got in on it.

She ran to the bed, "William, William! William, dear!" She shook him, pinched his forearm, and nothing. William's eyes were as wide as ever, not blinking, not moving, staring at a corner of the room.

"William, William!" yelled Ruth. She simulated crying, loudly, disconsolately, "Aaah, William, oh please, please, don't be, don't be, aaah!"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" William sat up in bed.

Ruth paraded out of the room. "Breakfast in twenty minutes," she said.

And so it was for a time. Ruth would wake up and go along with the rehearsals, as William's health declined noticeably. His eyes, the way his now-all-white hair flattened, the enlarged veins on the back of his hands. And yet, his sense of humor:

"Oh, Ruth, come on, I'm dying here, put your back into it.

"Come on, old lady, is that the best you can do for a man who's given you the best sixty-one years of his life?!"

"Ruth, I tell you, those better be real tears!"

She thought about the insanity of the rehearsals. About the cruelty of the rehearsals. William died often, perhaps close to two hundred times. A very peculiar man, she would think sometimes, with annoyance, with pain, with wonder and love.

One morning Ruth woke up. William, yet again, was still, very still. She tried to slowly make her way out of the bed, trying not to disturb him if he was asleep. The bed creaked loudly.

"Ah, what..." William murmured.

"Shh, shh." Ruth walked around the bed and groped for her robe; putting it on, she announced breakfast. "In twenty minutes," she said.

“Yesss...” came his raspy voice.

She walked slowly to the bathroom, then on to the kitchen. She prepared the same breakfast she had made the last few years, in the same amounts, although William now ate much less.

She arranged the cups, the plates, the utensils on the table. She looked in the fridge, took out her juice and his beverage.

Twenty minutes, maybe twenty-five. She looked towards the bedroom door, halfway open. “Breakfast’s ready!”

She sat down at the table and slowly, very slowly, ate her breakfast.

Thirty-five minutes, maybe forty-five. She stood up and walked to the bedroom door but did not push it wide open. “William, dear. Bill, come on,” she said loudly, flatly, from the hall. She could not remember the last time she had called him Bill. She returned to the kitchen. She stared for a long long while at the table. Another ten minutes, maybe fifteen or twenty.

She took her plate and scraped off what she had not eaten into the garbage. She took her husband’s plate and did the same.

Ruth walked to the sink and opened the blinds of the window in front of it. There used to be an orange tree across the street; she thought about that tree, she

remembered it. She turned on the water, waited a long time for it to turn warm, then hot. As she started to do the dishes, as her throat burned and her eyes welled up and her hands, her heart, shook, she said with a smile, sadly, sadly:

“So much for rehearsals.”

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