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The Woman on the Balcony

by

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Laura's husband had just died, and she lost her life as well. Depression took it away from her. She was still breathing, yes, and eating and sleeping, but she was not living. She couldn't remember the exact moment depression had arrived. It didn't strike like lightning or announce its arrival with a trumpet. It was much more subtle than that. In fact, even when she was lying in bed to "rest" on a beautiful sunny afternoon, with the blinds partly or completely closed, it didn't immediately occur to Laura that she was depressed. A lot of other words came to mind first: exhausted; struggling; alone. She also didn't see that, in a sense anyway, she had lost her life. She saw it another way: "This is my life." The heaviness, the dimness, the despair, the loss of interest in activities she used to love—all of that didn't amount to depression in her mind at first, but rather registered as "my life."

Laura had been married to her husband for many years. They had recently moved to a place where the weather is nice and people spend their vacation time. They had only just arrived—having moved far away from their former home, close to where their daughter lives—and were embarking on a new phase of life, retirement, when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Unlike Laura's depression, the cancer diagnosis *did* strike like lightning. Her husband had had some "health hiccups" over the years, as most people do, but nothing that

suggested that cancer was in the cards, or anything else of that magnitude. The diagnosis was a complete surprise to everyone, but they barely had time to process the reality of it because Laura's husband was gone within a few months.

After he died, Laura decided to stay in the apartment where she and her husband planned to spend their golden years. To be accurate, it wasn't exactly a decision; it just was. Laura had absolutely no energy for another move right now. She was exhausted and grief-stricken after the harrowing experiences of the past few months, and nearly all she could do now was stay in place and breathe.

She woke up many days in a row feeling nauseated after her husband's passing. In better times, one of the first things she thought about each morning was what she wanted or needed to do that day. Now, she thought about throwing up. She also thought about ginger, especially ginger cookies, ginger ale, ginger tea, and ginger chews—anything that might help relieve the discomfort. The nausea was always worst first thing in the morning. She kept waking up with a queasy feeling in her chest and stomach. It was there because of what just happened, and also because it was impossible to reverse it. She couldn't undo the fact that her husband died and was never coming back. All she could do was accept it. Each day she woke up with the sick feeling and the realization that he was gone, but at least the nausea and the goal of finding ginger to help ease it gave her a reason to leave her apartment—otherwise, she may have never left.

Laura did leave her dwelling at times, for brief periods, mainly to round up necessities. The rest of the time she spent inside her new home, alone. She had been looking forward to decorating the apartment and dressing up the balcony outside with plants. Now she couldn't manage to do either one. She was crawling

through the days, barely able to do the basics, let alone enthusiastically decorate her home or buy plants for the balcony. Once the nausea subsided in the morning she had a light breakfast and then moved through the days robotically. There was no aim greater than trying to get through them, while also finding ways to ease the pain.

Laura wore cardigan sweaters at home even though it was warm and sunny outside. At night, she often listened to music or looked at old photos until tears ran down her face and didn't stop. She let them fall and fell together with them. She fell deep inside the memories that surfaced, and deep inside the emotions she felt. Scenes would come to mind at random and she would sit with them for a while. She would recall a tender moment with her husband or a painful one, and it would make her smile suddenly or cry a little harder.

One day Laura was lying on the couch in the middle of the afternoon when she heard a commotion outside. She often lay on the couch in the middle of the day for a nap, and it seemed the naps were becoming longer. She would open her eyes after a while but have no energy or desire to get up. So she would close her eyes again, and then open them. Close them and open them. She would think about getting up but her body would not respond at all. It felt as heavy as concrete and at the same time hollow because she lacked desire and reasons for getting up.

Then one day Laura heard a commotion. She opened her eyes but otherwise remained still, listening. She closed her eyes again and tried to return to a state of sleep or lifelessness or whatever it was, but the noise continued, so she opened her eyes once more and listened. As the sound kept on, she debated

with herself about whether or not to go over to the balcony door to see where it was coming from, and to find out exactly what it was. She really didn't want to get up, but her curiosity was mounting. When it became too great to ignore, she got off the couch and walked over to the balcony door. There was a curtain hanging over the door. Laura moved it gently to the side, just a bit, and looked out. When she did, she found the source of the sound right away: Across from her balcony, there was another one belonging to an apartment building that sat fairly close to her own. The two buildings were divided by a path and a greened up area below. The balcony opposite her own had been empty for a while, but now a young man and a young woman were moving plants and furniture onto it.

Laura closed the curtain, not thinking much of it, but in the coming days she found herself standing by the balcony door time and again, wanting to look out. Each time she would move the curtain ever so slightly and look toward her neighbors' balcony. The balcony was more spacious than her own. It had room for a loveseat, chairs, a dining table, and some plants. There was a large plant with green leaves and pink flowers in a terracotta flowerpot. Laura stood still and admired the plant, and observed the furniture and decorative pieces they had put out there.

One day Laura moved the curtain to the side and quickly closed it again. The young woman was sitting outside with a book, and Laura felt like a snoop. Unable to curb her curiosity, however, she again moved the curtain to the side and looked out. The woman was lost in the pages of her book and didn't see Laura, so Laura kept looking. Her neighbor had long dark hair and was about 30

years old. She reminded Laura of her own daughter, Valerie, who used to live nearby but was now far away.

For some reason the scene put peace into Laura's heart and grounded her in a pleasant way. It also drew her forward, like a hand reaching out and leading her into the light. One day she was standing on her own balcony, not able to recall how she got there. She was completely at odds with her environment: Her face was pale and she was wearing one of her cardigan sweaters, soon realizing that she was overdressed.

With her head down Laura scanned the balcony floor as if looking for something she lost. The front strands of her hair were falling into her face. She occasionally swept them aside, still engrossed in thought. If she was going to sit outside she would need an umbrella or some other form of sun protection. If you asked her when, exactly, she decided that she was going to sit outside, she wouldn't be able to tell you. What she knew for sure is that she needed an umbrella, so she went out one day and bought one.

Back on her balcony she struggled to get it open. She was trapped inside of it, practically getting consumed by the thing. To make matters worse, she had forgotten to buy a stand to go with it, and would have to somehow prop it up. She had been extremely absentminded lately, as if grief was using up all of her energy, leaving little to none left over for basic functions such as remembering.

Laura paused for a moment, feeling overwhelmed by this seemingly simple task. Absolutely *nothing* felt simple to her these days, as long as she was in this state. In spite of being withdrawn she was craving support and assistance, but she didn't know where to find it. How could she get support when she wasn't up for

talking to people? She would have gladly talked to her husband, but he was not there, at least not in physical form. She sometimes talked to him nonetheless, in a dream, silently in her heart, or in a soft voice in a dark room. He would have known what to do with the umbrella she was struggling to open and prop up. He was the practical one with technical skills. Her own strengths lay in other areas. Each and every time she encountered a problem that her husband could have easily solved, or took on a task that was more suited to his abilities, she realized that where it was once easy it was now hard. She felt lost at these times. Sometimes she instinctively went to look for him in the apartment, or picked up the phone to call him, and then realized he wasn't there. Her companion was gone and she was alone with the umbrella, not knowing what to do with it.

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Rachel was sitting outside the day her neighbor was trying to erect the umbrella. She was reading a book at the time, occasionally peering over the rim of it to watch the activity on the neighboring balcony. Right after she and her husband moved in to this apartment, she never saw anyone using the opposite balcony. The only things on it were a small table and two chairs. It looked empty and lifeless, as if no one was even living in that apartment. She did see lights inside the apartment at night, but no one used the balcony until one day a woman appeared wearing a dark gray cardigan sweater and a doubtful expression. She looked around the balcony floor as if she was confused and lost. She had gray hair

that was straight and shoulder-length, and a face that was partly concealed by the front strands.

Rachel and her husband had just recently moved in to this apartment after relocating for her husband's job. They were now living in a place that people travel to for vacation. That was new for her—living in a vacation destination—and so was everything else. Rachel knew only a handful of people so far, including some neighbors and a few of her husband's colleagues. She was becoming familiar with the mailman and the faces of some of the people who worked at a local grocery store, but she didn't have any friends here, or a job.

She spent a lot of time on their balcony in the beginning. Rachel liked to go outside to read, take care of the plants, and eat lunch. At night, after her husband returned from work, they sometimes sat together under the starry sky with a glass of wine amid flickering candlelight. Most of the time, however, she was alone. She didn't even see anyone using the neighboring balcony until the day the woman appeared in the gray sweater, and then again to erect the umbrella.

Ever since those two days, the woman began appearing on the balcony regularly—always, it seemed, when Rachel was outside. She never made eye contact with Rachel. Sometimes the only thing she did was step outside for a minute before disappearing in her apartment again. One time she sat at the small table with a book, but she couldn't get past the first page, as far as Rachel could tell. Rachel couldn't help but look over at the neighboring balcony to quietly observe the mysterious woman. She was trying to figure out who she was.

When Rachel looked through the windows of her apartment, she almost never saw the woman outside on her balcony, but when Rachel herself was

outside, the woman often appeared as if by magic, or she would emerge the next day to engage in the same activity that Rachel had been doing the day before. For example, one day Rachel went outside to hang laundry in the sun, and the next day the woman appeared outside with a laundry basket of her own.

So often the two women were outside together, one of them reading while the other ate a sandwich, one of them writing something down while the other hung clothes. They spent a lot of time “together,” and yet even after weeks of this companionship the woman had still not made eye contact with Rachel, or waved, or smiled. It was as though Rachel was not even present, but Rachel knew the woman knew she was there. In fact, she seemed to come outside for that very reason. She seemed to enjoy Rachel’s company, and—even though the woman was emotionally distant—Rachel enjoyed her company as well.

Gradually the mysterious woman’s balcony started coming to life. She had put some plants outside and seemed to delight in taking care of them. She watered them regularly, and sometimes gave the leaves a tender touch. At night, she would retreat behind the creamy curtain that almost always hung over her balcony door. In the dark of night, a warm golden light shined through it. Rachel sometimes looked at the light and wondered about the woman. Was she single? A widow? Did she have children? Grandchildren? What did she do every day when she wasn’t on the balcony? What was her name?

One day Rachel went outside to water the plants and a surprising sight caught her attention: The woman was not alone on her balcony, for the first time ever. There was a younger woman with her that day, a woman of about Rachel’s

age. The two women were sitting at the small table, having a beverage. They had a similar body shape. “Is that her daughter?” Rachel wondered.

About a week later, Rachel was walking through the community where she lived and saw her neighbor walking right in front of her. Rachel couldn’t believe her eyes. She had spent so much time with the mysterious woman who lived across from her, but the two of them had never come this close, standing almost right next to each other on the ground, no balcony railings dividing them. The woman was wearing white pants, a pink top, and had her hair neatly combed into place—she looked nice. Rachel smiled into the back of the woman’s head. She wanted to introduce herself and speak to her neighbor for the first time, but then she saw the bus approaching. She had been on her way to a bus stop at the time, and right after seeing the woman she saw the bus, which caused her to start running.

It wasn’t until Rachel was seated on the bus that she realized what just happened: She was given a chance to finally meet her neighbor, and she lost it. There was a hollow feeling in her chest, the kind that accompanies the knowledge that one has just done something she cannot undo. Rachel looked through the window to see if she could spot her neighbor, but the woman was gone.

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After that day, Rachel rarely saw the mysterious woman on her balcony, but she didn’t think much of it. She had been outside far less often herself lately after finding a job and making a friend, both of which were occupying her time.

When she finally looked over one day to see if her neighbor was outside, she saw something that made her freeze: the balcony was empty.

The table and chairs were gone. The plants were gone. The creamy curtain that hung over the balcony door was gone. Rachel could now see directly inside the neighboring apartment through the balcony door, and as far as she could tell it was empty too. Her heart dropped. Seemingly overnight the woman had packed up and left. Rachel kept looking at the vacant balcony to see if the woman returned, but she never did. She also kept thinking about the day when she ran past her neighbor on her way to the bus stop. She had missed her chance to say hello to the person who had helped her feel less alone as she adjusted to a new life in a new place. The woman had helped Rachel in a quiet but significant way. Without knowing it, Rachel had done the same for the woman. Neither of them knew the other one's name.

The End

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