

# Better Than God

NOW:

I'M KISSING HIM goodbye for the last time. Tears are welling in my eyes. He doesn't know why I'm crying. He doesn't know he's at the airport. He doesn't know I've taped three hundred tablets of ecstasy to the inside of his thigh, and he's about to get on a one-way non-stop flight.

Of course, I've told him all of this many, many times, but he doesn't remember any of it.

He has Alzheimer's. And I promised I would kill him.

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Before:

One afternoon, a few months after he was diagnosed my mother phoned me at work completely frantic. My father was trying to leave the house naked, insisting he had to go to the city hall and file their marriage license.

By the time I got there he was gone, and she was sitting on the porch, her hands shaking, speaking to herself, a massive shiner under her eye from trying to stop him. A few hours later the police delivered him home without much sympathy. They'd found him waiting for the B-Line on Thurston Street standing in the bus shelter right next to Fairland Elementary School.

He was wrapped in a gray fireproof blanket, embarrassed and lucid. He hobbled upstairs to bed while me and my mother apologized and thanked the police. They saw the bruise on her face and warned us that things would only get worse.

“Consider getting full-time homecare,” said one of the cops, “or put him in an assisted living facility. This can’t happen again.”

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So we hired a private nurse, a big Turkish guy from Ankara named Mustafa. We couldn’t afford him full-time so he came late in the mornings and left in the early afternoon, that way my mom would only have to look after my father for a short time until I could get there after work. Mustafa was a podiatrist in Turkey, yet he never seemed embittered by the unfortunate fact that our government didn’t consider him qualified enough to help feet that belonged to people standing on this part of the planet.

Mustafa was a liberal Muslim, and my father was a loose Orthodox. At the beginning, whenever my father was lucid they would talk about God together, and Mustafa would tell him about what the Koran says about Allah, and my father would tell Mustafa what the Gospels say about Jesus.

Mustafa was very gentle with my father, and he was good at controlling him whenever the disease took over and my father tried to leave the house, or insisted on doing something nonsensical. Sometimes he had to subdue him; literally hold the old man down on the floor and not let him up until the fit passed. Often times, when I would get there after work Mustafa would still be at the house looking after him, he’d have tears in his eyes, telling me that my father keeps begging to die, begging to be killed.

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Before long:

The lapses of lucidity were coming more frequently and with greater potency, sometimes lasting several hours, sometimes several days. And during every increasingly rare moment of clarity my father begged to die. Whoever was near he would grab by the hand, look deeply and clearly into their eyes, and with a hoarse whisper, he would say, “Kill me. Please, kill me.”

Eventually Mustafa couldn’t take it anymore. He came to me nearly six months after I’d hired him, asked me out on to the porch, sat me down and told me he was sorry.

“I’m not right for this,” he said. “I work with feet.”

“What can I do?”

“He’s getting much worse, and I just can’t...I’m having trouble watching it.”

“So am I.”

“He begs me to kill him, Michael.”

“I know.”

“I can’t look into his eyes anymore.”

“It’s not easy for me, either. He’s my father and I godda watch this happen to him. I godda wipe his ass and bathe him and feed him like he’s another son. I don’t even sleep anymore. I don’t see my wife, my little boy.”

“Put him in a home, Michael.”

“I can’t afford it. I can hardly afford you.”

“Please, find someone else.”

He finally sat next to me, prayed his hands together and then covered his face, washed it with dry hands.

“I’m thinking about going to the Netherlands,” I said.

“They won’t do it,” he said. “It’s too late. He’s unfit to make the decision.”

“But if he’s lucid when they test him...”

“He’s never lucid for more than a minute anymore, Michael.”

“I’m going to have the doctor change his medication, if it works, I’m bringing him.”

“And what about your mother?”

“I’m not going to tell her.”

“But you’ll tell me.”

“You’ve been with him, Mustafa. You’ve see that look in his eyes when he begs. You know he wants this. And I don’t know about you, but if it were me, if I ever get like that, I would want the same.”

Mustafa nodded agreeably.

“You’re a doctor, Mustafa. I know it’s your oath to save people’s lives, and I know your religion forbids this, but...”

“You want my opinion?”

“Yes.”

“As a doctor, a Muslim, or a man?”

“As a man.”

“He’s lucid when he begs. He knows what he’s become. Those flickers of awareness are making him suffer.”

“Thank you.”

Mustafa extended his hand and I took it, pulled him up from his seat and hugged him.

“Good-bye, my friend,” he said. “And when he’s there, tell him goodbye from me.”

“I will.”

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But it was impossible not to tell my mother. I had to let her say goodbye. I’d always thought it was unfair of God not to let us say goodbye to our loved ones. Instead he steals them from us in the middle of the night while they’re asleep, or crushes them to death by a drunk driver, drowns them in a hurricane, or swallows them up with a tsunami, then he makes us weep and wail and say goodbye to a pile of useless flesh, bones, fingernails, and hair. Or even worse: a memory.

Now, here was my chance to do something better than God.

Here I called my mother into the kitchen, sat her down and let her know right away that I’d arranged a trip to the Netherlands, and that Dad wasn’t coming back.

“But he’s been getting better lately,” she said.

“He’s not getting better, Mom. It’s the medication. He’s not going to get better. You know he wants this, Mom.”

“But your father’s not God.”

“And God’s not him. God’s not us. People can be humane, God can’t. To hold onto Dad like this is our own selfishness. We’re making him suffer.”

“But at night, when he sleeps, when he’s next to me, it’s like it’s always been, I need him there at night with me.”

She tried to fight her tears but it was useless. I wrapped my arms around her bony shoulders and cried with her. For our suffering.

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Mustafa was right. It was too late, and the trip to Europe was all for nothing. The doctor I met couldn’t assist him. He understood my predicament, my father’s wishes, but my father didn’t show a glimmer of awareness the entire consultation, and quite simply, he couldn’t do it. I asked him if there were other options, other doctors that could help.

“Probably,” he said, “but I can’t recommend any for you.”

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I took my father back to our hotel room and put him to bed. He slept peacefully. He slept and I wished he wouldn't wake up. He wasn't my father anymore. He wasn't even a human being anymore. He was a deformity. A shell. Empty. All of the memories he'd collected gone. Burned up like a photo album in a house fire. I wanted to take my pillow and cover his face, hold it there until he ceased breathing.

But I couldn't suffocate him.

I couldn't kill my father.

I didn't have the heart for that, even if I wouldn't get caught.

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The next morning I was in the lobby reading the news on the Internet, more specifically a report about an un-medicated schizophrenic British national that tried smuggling a kilo of cocaine into Beijing, was caught at customs, and sentenced to die by the end of the week. The article mentioned that the Chinese had no sympathy for the fact that the man was being used as a drug-mule with no idea about what was in his suitcase, or even aware of what he was doing.

That article sent me into the streets of Amsterdam asking shady looking people standing on street corners for ecstasy. It took me four days, but I gathered nearly 300 tablets.

Then I bought him a flight ticket to Beijing, put the ecstasy tablets in a balloon and taped it to the inside of my father's leg, and brought him to the airport.

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Now:

I'm kissing him goodbye for the last time. Tears are welling in my eyes. He doesn't know why I'm crying. He doesn't know he's at the airport. He doesn't know I will alert the authorities before the plane touches the ground. He doesn't know he'll be executed by the end of the week.