

Tending Constance Sayers

When Christina mentioned taking a trip to Italy, the doctor dropped his prescription pad on the floor. Dr. Barrie had been furiously writing on several pages of the pad, but stopped instantly when she said the words “airplane” and “Italy.”

“I don’t think that is exactly wise at this stage, do you?” He never looked up and never missed a beat, his left hand dotting and crossing things with his pen and ripping off sheets of small paper and handing them to her.

If Christina had any doubts that things were getting worse, his answer coupled with the look on his face made things clear. “So,” she twisted her arms together like she had done when she was nervous as a child. “Is there a name for this particular stage of cancer?” She accepted the loose sheets of paper as he dealt them to her. “Am I somewhere between ‘likely to die’ but ‘not quite dead yet?’”

He tucked his pad in his white coat. “That’s not funny.”

After a year of treating her, Christina could tell that Dr. Barrie thought he knew her well—everyone did. She shrugged. “Well then, I guess if I’m still here in the larger sense, I could be there...in Italy I mean. It’s just as good a place as here.”

“I don’t agree.” He wrote some additional things in her inch-thick file, smiled and walked out.

The next morning at breakfast, Christina decided to tell Oliver that she was going to Rome. Alone. He was out of vacation time from the trips to Sloan Kettering and the Mayo Clinic. The unspoken thing between them was that he couldn’t afford to use more vacation time because he would need it when things got worse. And things were going to get much worse.

”You can’t even taste anything and you want to go to Italy of all places?” Christina could tell he thought he was being humorous. He flipped the Sports section down for a minute to study her. “What would you eat?”

She remembered the last time she’d been in Italy. She hadn’t known Oliver yet and she had driven past the olive oil factory in Umbria. It had been the most amazing almost fruity smell that she almost couldn’t place at first. Now, her taste buds had been burned from the radiation treatment, but she still had the sense of smell. That sense had only gotten stronger as she had lost taste. She closed her eyes and imagined garlic cooking in fresh olive oil. Maybe that would be enough.

Christina understood Oliver’s need to fix her. He was an engineer after all. It was clear, though, by now that she would not be repaired. And somewhere deep down, she thought that he blamed her for not trying hard enough to fix herself as if it were that easy. She wasn’t sure thought that perhaps he thought it was that easy and that she just didn’t want to get well bad enough.

“I suppose you’re going, no matter what I say.” He looked sunken. The Sports section flipped back up and he was silent.

“I want to see it again...*one last time.*” She felt the need to explain herself. Had she been healthy she would never have defied him like this, but this tumor growing in her chest had begun to take on a personality. It did and said things that healthy Christina never would. She could tell by the silence that he had not liked that she had used the phrase “one last time.”

“I’m sure Dr. Barrie agrees that this is a good thing.” Oliver never asked a question. It was a quirk of Oliver’s that Christina had never noticed until she had gotten sick. It also had never bothered her until then either.

She paused. Christina hated to lie outright so she nodded instead. When Oliver hadn't heard her, he folded the paper and looked at her and she nodded again.

He studied her face for a moment. She wondered if he knew she was lying and she wondered what he really thought of her these days. Did he still think she was pretty even though the color of her face was a cross between an old metal desk and a yellow squash? Her chestnut hair hung down below her shoulders in ringlets—her best feature—was now gone

He folded the newspaper into a neat pile and put his coffee cup in the sink before heading off to work. She watched his car pull out of the driveway and she headed back to the bedroom. She had work to do.

Oliver hadn't noticed much lately. Christina's closet was almost bare. About a month ago, she began giving away all of her clothes and essentially was alternating between two outfits. At first, she'd gathered a few things in small plastic shopping bags, but now she had progressed to heavy-duty lawn bags. Today, it would be shoes. She couldn't imagine Oliver doing it when she was dead—and who would help him? He would be happy when he opened her closet one day with the task of cleaning it only to find that she had taken care of it for him.

Her jewelry had been a little harder to give away because he always loved to buy her things. Still, she had found a way to pawn most of it and set up a burial fund. She put the monthly statement with the recent balance in an envelope marked "To Bury Me" and placed it in her underwear drawer—the only drawer that was still overflowing.

Around the time she started chemotherapy she had given her "fat" jeans to the voluptuous teenaged girl across the street. People had commented on her weight loss and asked if she had been counting points. Her wig was to be complimented for the fact that no one noticed how sick she was, not even the neighbors watching her lug bag after bag of clothing to

the curb for Goodwill. She'd shaved her head when the first clump of hair had fallen out. She took Oliver's electric razor in hand and took one last look at herself before she took the scissors and hacked off the section starting with the hair above her ears. She needed to get this part over with like jumping into the lake at the first of summer when the water wasn't yet ready.

After some searching, she found her suitcase on in the hall closet and zipped it open only to realize she didn't have enough clothes to fill even half of it. She sat down on the bed and made herself breathe. The breathlessness was getting worse, but she shook it off and stood up.

Sitting on her dresser in front of her in a silver frame only known photo of her two dead great aunts. The photo was the real reason Christina had wanted to go Italy. A year ago she had made a promise to her mother that she would see their graves. She took the frame down and held it.

It had been a deathbed promise that Christina had made to her mother who at the time was a patient at the lung cancer ward of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. "No one has ever been to visit them—ever. Can you imagine such a thing? That you died and you had been totally forgotten." Christina's mother clutched her hand. "I'm dying and I always said I'd go and I never did. Promise me you'll go." At the time, Christina thought she would all the time in the world.

Her mother was now buried near the Squirrel Hill Tunnel in one of those modern memorial cemeteries with metal placards not gravestones. Her mother's memorial featured a holder for a small bouquet of flowers and the brass placard was set low so the lawnmower could glide over it smoothly.

The doomed aunts Stella and Marie had both died before the age of twenty-one. As a child Christina had thought of them of cursed things, so she had avoided looking at the photo, but as she had gotten older they had fascinated her and now the photo sat on her own dresser. Rather than seeing them as cursed, she now felt like she was fading away from this world into theirs. At the beginning of her illness, this thought would have frightened her, but Christina felt her connection with the living slipping.

Christina touched the photo before wrapping it in a t-shirt and placing it in the suitcase. Stella, the oldest aunt, was wearing earrings—the same earrings Christina still possessed and one of the few pairs she had kept. Stella’s hair, cut in a bob, refused to conform to the lines and angles so popular in the 1920s and instead curled toward her face. By contrast, the younger aunt, Maria, was more romantic with her white peasant dress that was gathered at the chest and her dark flowing hair. The dress looked uncomfortable. It reminded Christina of the gauze and elastic shirts she had worn as a child in the 70s. She remembered them being so itchy.

Itchy. That was really how it all started. Christina’s legs had been so itchy at night. First, she thought it was a rash, but nothing red had appeared on her skin. Later, after she had scratched her legs raw, she went to a doctor.

“You’re itchy only at night?”

She nodded.

And then he found the lymph node—hard and large—and then another and another. “We’ll do some blood work.” She noticed as he walked out the door that he didn’t reassure her that she didn’t need to worry. Blood work became biopsies, and biopsies became Hodgkin’s disease stage III A. At the beginning, the “A” part of the diagnosis seemed important.

Oliver refused to drive Christina to the airport. But he had bought her three dozen Calla Lillies to try and persuade her to stay.

Christina stood at the door with her suitcase. The taxicab was waiting for her outside. She didn't want him to lift the suitcase because it was so light that she couldn't bear the conversation of what had become of her clothes.

"I don't understand this," he looked pale. "You cannot manage a trip like this alone." His use of the word "manage" made her bristle.

Christina had seen Oliver's hopes rise and fall with every treatment and test—each closing options for them and shortening time. Oliver found something innovative at Johns Hopkins and then at Sloan Kettering and Mayo. His need to fix her had overshadowed the time remaining for them.

"I'm tired."

"Then why are you traveling?"

She shook her head to stop him from speaking and put her cold, bony hand on his. "I'm so sorry, but I'm tired of this. I'm tired of being the sick one."

Oliver began to speak but she stopped him by putting her hand to his lips.

"I have weeks Oliver. A few good weeks and you and I both know it. I can't be here in that time. I feel half dead in this house." She stopped and thought if she should more, but then decided against it.

When she landed in Rome, she called Oliver.

"I've been thinking." She paused. "Please buy three plots."

"Not this again." His voice is calm. "Why would you say such a thing?"

“Your next wife will want it that way. I’m thinking of her.” She could probably not say these things to him in person. She is sure he is angry.

“Do we really have to talk about this now?”

In fact, she has been thinking about burial a lot lately. To be buried next to her parents in Pittsburgh would admit failure to her—after all, she built a life with Oliver, bought shelf liner, matching towels, a tool set. To return to her parents would evoke pity—a lack of accomplishment. A single grave was something she almost couldn’t bear—like those of graves of children that are eventually are neglected and forgotten because they are not part of a larger unit. “You never want to talk about it.”

“No Christina,” he sighed. “I never want to think about it. There’s a big difference.”

She thinks she hears him crying, but she is not sure.

“Can you do something for me?”

“Sure.”

“Please stop making this tidy for me, okay?” His voice sounds choppy. “No matter how organized and thoughtful you make this for me.” He stops. “Losing you will never be okay, okay?”

Suddenly, Christina’s voice catches for a moment and she cannot speak. He has never admitted to her that he thinks she might not be okay. Up until now, he was been the one pushing her on and she realizes she has been pushing back. But pushing back from what? All of her energy has been focused on the fact that she is the one leaving and he will be losing her, but suddenly she cannot bear the thought that she is losing him. She says the only thing she can say and it isn’t profound. “Okay.”

They are silent for moment, but neither of them wants to hang up. Finally, Oliver speaks.

“You should be here. I should be with you.”

Christina has taken the train from Rome for about eleven U.S. dollars to the Spoleto station. From there, she will take a taxi up the mountain to the cemetery gates.

From her mother, she knows each of the stories.

When Great-aunt Stella died, the family had blamed a boy in Turin for infecting her. She had run off with him and had returned to them only in a small wooden casket. When the boy brought her body back he was turned away at the door by Christina’s great-grandfather, Guittorio, who wept over the small casket containing his daughter’s remains. The boy cried in the doorway of a nearby shop while a distraught Guittorio pried open the casket to see the dead face of his Stella, his oldest daughter. Nineteen.

“She should have been here,” he said as he held her thin body in his arms.

When Guittorio’s youngest daughter, Anna, announced she was going to America with her new husband and baby daughter, Guittorio began to weep and took to his bed.

“God is taking them from me one by one.”

The following year Anna received news that Maria, the quiet, serious sister, had also come down with tuberculosis.

“She is home here,” wrote Guittorio. “We are hoping God will deliver her. Please say prayers for your sister.”

Maria died the following month in the heat of July in Spoleto, Italy.

In August of 1936, Guittoria would collapse and die of a heart attack on the road outside of the very cemetery she is about to visit. He went faithfully every day to this cemetery to scrub the stones and plant pots of flowers. Her great grandmother would live alone until 1961. She would resist coming to America—even to visit. “I’m waiting to die,” she said. “I will die where I have lived.”

As she waits on the taxi, Christina imagines what Oliver’s new wife will think of her grave. Will she take pity on it? At first, helping Oliver put flowers on it once a year to show him how sensitive she is to his pain. But then as the luster of Oliver wears off and is replaced by everyday life and children who grow old, will Christina seem like ridiculous addition? Will new wife grow to resent Christina’s prime real estate next to her own living family? As new wife gains years with Oliver—more years than Christina ever had -- will she think that Christina did not deserve her place? Or will new wife look at the horror of the granite stone and see herself for a moment? Christina wonders how long Oliver and his new family would take care of her headstone—for it will have to be a single stone because they could not share a mutual stone. Although they spoke vows of forever and sickness and health, neither of them ever imagined this. These are the things that Christina knows she shouldn’t think about, but she does.

The taxi ride is quick and the driver pulls up to the walled city in front of a flower stand. She notices the pink roses and thinks of Oliver until she realizes the stand’s proximity to the cemetery entrance and realizes their purpose.

As she walks through the gates and the place seems to envelop her and the creaky hinge on the gate announces her arrival. The temperature is in the 90s and her wig is itchy. Overcome from the heat, she sits for a moment at the entrance to a well-manicured crypt. She

has never seen such an elaborate display. High mausoleums and slabs alternate. The crypt in front of her is about six feet tall and decorated with a glass window that has lace white lace curtains. She looks through the glass case to see an elaborate wooden coffin and turns away.

Old women in cotton dresses pass her and nod. Some are carrying plastic gloves, dust pans, and clear containers with skulls and crossbones crudely sketched in marker—essential tools of caring for the dead.

She steadies herself for a moment and wishes for Oliver—his steady frame and rational mind. A man built like Oliver passes her, and she wants to touch him. He walks over to a cement slab that he is cleaning. On the slab a black wooden cross and fresh flowers sit on top of an elaborate lace doily. The man lifts each one of them and brushes off the debris. He is joined by an older woman—perhaps his mother—who begins to manicure the flowers around the cement slab. She is pulling weeds and tossing them away. Christina is surprised to see photos on most of the graves. She can see that the man and his mother are working on an older man's grave. Christina can see from the haircut and polo shirt in the photo that this is a recent death. The clothes and photos look more modern than the others. As the man takes an empty cup back to the fountain he frowns at her. She has witnessed his secret ritual, and he doesn't seem to appreciate her voyeurism.

After she has regained her strength, Christina begins her climb up the slight grade, getting lost for a minute in one of the oldest sections of the graveyard. There, she notices another young man's photo. She looks at his birth date and sees that the man is four years older than her. She thinks what she would have done with those years—how Oliver would have filled her time with trips, parties, and children.

She and Oliver hadn't made love since she was sick. In fact, the last time had been the time he noticed her scabbed legs and suggested that maybe she had a serious skin condition. Sleep was such a necessity for her that Oliver wouldn't dare demand anything else from her before bed or in the morning. He certainly wouldn't wake her in the night by rousing her with his razor stubble against her neck and his hands forcing open her thighs as he had in the early days of their marriage. That was for healthy couples. Yet Oliver was so healthy. He came home each evening with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He still smoked even though Christina had cancer. He'd take one last long drag before he put it out on the front step near the basil plant. He looked weary as if he needed the cigarette before he could bear to walk through the door. She didn't mind that he smoked, and he never did around her. What she did mind is that he looked older these days, like she has aged him.

As Christina passes the common vaults she hears the clank of tools and casual conversation between workers perched high on a piece of scaffolding. They are repointing a large two-story crypt that seems to have multiple coffins inside. Chisels hit stones. The sound is hollow and rhythmic and surprisingly peaceful. Something foul like dried, rotting honeysuckle catches her nose and a wave of nausea comes over her. She leans over a stone like she is going to throw up but instead she gets up and takes off running.

It is not easy to run with a tumors in her chest, but Christina manages. This was a bad idea, she thinks. The future—this future with the dead—sickens her. She realizes that all of the preparing she has done—the clothes and the burial fund has not been for Oliver, but for her and she is not ready. She is not ready. She is not ready. The reality of this hits her and she lurches over and vomits near a tree. She wipes her mouth and looks around. She sees death—all

around her and coming for her at every turn. Somehow, she thought this visit would prepare her.

The sun has gotten hot. It is nearly noon, and Christina makes her way back toward the old church of the Spoleto graveyard. A bell begins to chime behind her. She sees a stone marked “495.” She counts down the stones until she reaches 462-- the crypt bearing “Matriciana,” her mother’s family name.

She can hear the workers throwing wood down from the roof of the crypt down the hill. They are singing now and laughing. It is another day of work for them. The snap of the wood is rhythmic with their song.

In front of her, she sees the simple slab that contains all four of her family members. It is the simplest outdoor slab. Not an elaborate mausoleum like the ones next to it. In a glass bubble on top of the slab is container with a family photo. She wipes the leaves from the top of the slab so she can see. The slab is dirty and covered in soot from years of neglect. She sees the faces of Guittorio and her great-grandmother Cupidio for the first time. The face of her family—their strong noses and dark curly hair. In a few years, her photos in the crypt will risks erosion and they will be gone forever. She sees photos of her great-aunts Stella and Maria—fated like her. Stella’s short and trendy hair, Maria’s piled high on her head. Christina feels her wig curly like theirs.

A pot holder next to the vault is rusted and empty. A generous layer of foliage covers the flat cement slab. Christine sweeps away all of the leaves, and she puts her hands on the stone to feel the carved words. “Stella, died in Turin.”

She holds her fingers to the words. She feels comforted by the variations of her face that stare back at her. Suddenly her wig does not feel real to her. She pulls it from her scalp

and is relieved to feel the breeze on her naked head. Her relatives peer back at her as if accepting of her illness—unashamed by what she has revealed to them.

Below, in another row of graves a funeral is proceeding. A Toyota truck is loading flowers. Aged mourners make their way to the dead. The old come weary, shifting their weight heavily from one hip to another. Christina can tell they view this place with a secret dread like she does.

Christina gathers her wig, but does not put it on. She is sick, and she is dying. She touches the photos of Guittorio—his stubborn devotion to tending to the graves—the markers of his daughters. He reminds her of Oliver.

“You should be here,” Oliver said to her, and she answers aloud, “I am coming.”