

Dancing in the Rain

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I hesitated outside the door of room 305, my hand poised to knock. As a first-year resident, I'd grown accustomed to the daily rhythms of hospital life—the beeping monitors, the shuffling feet, the mingled scents of antiseptic and sickness. Yet one patient always made me pause, reminding me why I chose this path.

I took a deep breath and rapped my knuckles against the wood

“Come in!” a voice chirped from inside.

I pushed open the door. There she was, propped up in bed, a riot of colorful scarves concealing the left side of her face, which drooped slightly from the stroke she'd suffered 2 months ago. At 70, Hazel had already endured more than most—the loss of her beloved husband Bud, the slow deterioration of her body—but you'd never know it from the way her eyes danced with irrepressible mirth.

“Well, well, if it isn't my favorite doctor!” Hazel grinned as I approached her bedside. “You're a sight for sore eyes, honey. I was just about to die of boredom in here.”

“We can't have that now, can we?” I chuckled, reaching for her chart. “How are you feeling today, Hazel?”

“Oh, just trying to show this old body who's boss!” She patted her weakened left leg, which lay motionless beneath the blanket. “I've got physical therapy in an hour. Gotta whip myself into shape so I can get back to my bridge club. Those ladies won't know what hit 'em!”

I shook my head, marveling at her unbeatable spirit. The stroke had robbed Hazel of many things—her mobility, her independence, even the symmetry of her smile—but it hadn't touched her zest for life.

“I'm sure you'll be running circles around them in no time,” I said, checking her vitals. “Your blood pressure's looking good, and your heart rate's nice and steady.”

“Well, that's a relief!” Hazel winked. “I was worried all that dancing might've taken its toll.”

“Dancing?” I raised an eyebrow.

“In my dreams, honey. In my dreams.” She sighed, a wistful expression crossing her face. “You know, Bud and I used to go dancing every Saturday night at the Paramount Theater downtown. He had the smoothest moves you ever saw. Could've put Fred Astaire to shame.”

I listened, rapt, as Hazel regaled me with stories of her youth in Springfield, sneaking into jazz clubs, painting murals on brick walls, falling in love with Bud during a city-wide blackout.

“Those were the days,” she murmured. “But you know what? Every day is a gift, doc. Every single one. Even the bad ones.”

She reached out and grasped my hand, her grip surprisingly strong. “I know I'm not as spry as I used to be, and this old ticker of mine might not have a lot of miles left on it. But I'll be damned if I waste a single moment feeling sorry for myself.”

I swallowed hard, blinking back sudden tears “You're an inspiration, Hazel. Truly.”

“Psh.” She waved a dismissive hand. “I’m just a stubborn old broad who refuses to go quietly into that good night. But I’ll tell you one thing, doc, you gotta squeeze every drop of juice out of this life. Dance in the rain. Eat the damn cannoli. Laugh ’til your face hurts. ’Cause one day, you’ll blink, and it’ll all be over.”

Her words stuck with me long after I left her room, echoing in my head as I went about my rounds. As a resident, I often found myself overwhelmed by the demands of the profession, the long hours, and the emotional toll of witnessing suffering. However, Hazel’s story served as a powerful reminder to cherish the good moments and to actively seek out the positive, even on the most challenging days. That evening, as rain pattered against the windows of my cramped studio apartment, I put on my shoes and headed outside. I stood on the sidewalk, tilting my face to the weeping sky, and began to smile. As I was enjoying the moment, I thought of Hazel, and the indelible mark she’d left on my life. She’d reminded me that there is always a reason to keep moving forward, to find the joy, the beauty, the ridiculous wonder of being alive. I knew that her journey was far from over, that she still had countless battles ahead of her. But I also knew that no matter what the future held, Hazel would face it with the same indomitable spirit that had carried her this far. As for me? I vowed to carry her lessons with me always, to live with gusto, to love with abandon, and to find the extraordinary in the everyday.