SHORT STORY

Mama's Fairy

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"Pink memory" by Mirja Paljakka

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Ria crouched behind the curtain, invisible to the people in the room where her mother lay on the bed. Two nurses stood on either side of her. One of them adjusted the pillow under her head while the other looked at the doctor as he glanced through her mother's file where the detailed records of her temperature, blood pressure, heart rate and many other readings were written.

The oxygen mask on her mother's face, the IV connected to her wrists and the wires from her body connected to the machines placed at the back of her head, gave it a very surreal feeling to Ria. The continuous beeping of the machines and the graphs they displayed had seemed very attractive to her in the beginning. In her pretend-play world she had imagined she was taking her mother to different galaxies and this was her star-ship. Over the weeks, the game had lost its charm and the beeping of machines sounded more ominous with every passing day.

Her mother had been a very lively young woman until a few months back when she had suddenly fallen sick. No one told the six-year-old Ria what had really happened to her mother. The occasional visits to the hospital turned into weekly visits, then occasional hospital stays and finally, it seemed to Ria, that the hospital with the nurses and medicines and equipment, had moved into their home.

A few remnants of the past remained in the room. Ria's father still kept the vase with fresh roses on the shelf opposite her mother's bed so that she could see her favorite flowers whenever she opened her eyes. Their fragrance, however, was now lost amidst the much stronger smell of medicines, chemicals and phenyl. The room which always had sunlight pouring in from one or the other window, now had heavy curtains on the windows drawn because the bright light irritated her mother. The books on the side table by the bed were replaced by medicines and files. There was no music, no laughter, no running around or even making any noise.

Ria was not allowed inside her mother's room, except for a few minutes in the early morning. That was one time of the day her mother managed to smile at her and talk a little.

Ria missed listening to her mother's sweet voice. She missed her mother's stories. It had been a ritual for as long as she remembered. Her mother would tell her fairy tales, some from books, some made up by her on the spot. She would tell her about fairies and distant magical lands. More than the princesses and princes, Ria loved the fairies, especially fairy godmothers who would help the princess in times of need. Her mother always called her 'my fairy.'

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“You, Ria, are Mama’s fairy who has given Mama so much happiness that she never thought was possible. You are my wish that has come true. I love you darling,” she would say as she kissed her goodnight.

Ria would smile and reply sleepily, “You are my fairy mother, Mama. I love you.”

Ria hoped that one day, her mother would magically get out of bed as if nothing had happened. She looked around the house, in the garden and on the nearby trees for signs of witches who could have cast a spell on her mother to make her sick. Every day, she hoped that some fairy would wave her magic wand and turn their life to as it was before. She could not believe the reality of what was happening even though she lived in it and suffered in it, silently.

One month back, when her mother had been moved home, on a stretcher, from the hospital, she had asked her father, “Papa, what has happened to Mama?” Her father had told her the same thing he had been telling her for the past few months.

“She is just a little tired. She will be fine soon.” This time however, he didn’t look at Ria and smile as he said it. He looked at the people carrying the stretcher. He had tears in his eyes, his lips quivered and his voice was shaky.

Ria had come to him and hugged him around his legs. He picked her up and held her close. “All will be fine, Ria. It has to be fine.” He said it more to comfort himself than Ria. Ria could feel the wetness of his cheek against hers. That was the day she knew her mother was more than just tired. It was the first time she had seen tears in her father’s eyes. She kissed her father’s wet cheek.

“Don’t worry Papa. Mama will be fine. I will ask my fairy godmother to make her healthy again.”

“Yes, my darling. Your fairy godmother is the only one who can make it right.”

Ria had been searching for her fairy godmother ever since. Every night, before going to bed, she would tightly close her eyes and pray to God with all the might she could muster, hoping every time that when she opened them, she would find a fairy standing in front of her. It never happened. A month had gone by and her childlike patience with God and fairy godmothers was slowly ebbing away.

No one told her the truth about what had happened to her mother. No one told her when her mother would tell her stories again or play with her or sing to her in her melodious voice.

Ria tried talking to the two nurses who had been appointed to take care of her mother. They would stop talking as soon as they saw her. They merely smiled and said, “All will be ok,

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you poor little girl." Their eyes, however, told a different story.

Ria was thoroughly confused. The words that everyone spoke to her seemed to suggest that everything was fine but their expressions, including her father's, seemed to say the exact opposite. Normal fevers and cough and cold had never dulled her spirits. Even though Ria was young in years, she did understand that this time it was something bad. That was why her father did not meet her eyes when he spoke about her mother, and the nurses gave her pitiful looks when they thought she wasn't looking.

"If no one will tell me the truth, I will find out for myself. If no one will help me, not God, not my fairy godmother, then I will help myself. This is what Mama always told me, that I should always help myself even if no one else will." And so, Ria started spending more time in her mother's room, quietly hidden behind curtains or in almirahs trying to decipher what the adults were hiding from her.

Loud noise irritated her mother so everyone only whispered in the room. This made things very difficult for Ria. From her hideouts, she had to strain hard to listen to what was being discussed. She caught only a few words here and there, sometimes full sentences. The doctor's conversation was sometimes full of medical jargon that she did not understand, but she tried her best to piece together all the information. She was sure by now that her mother was very ill.

This day, as she stood behind the curtains and peeped from the narrow slit in between, she saw the nurses whispering among them about her mother. Thankfully they were standing closer to where she hid so Ria could hear them.

"The poor woman is in great pain. I wonder how she bears it."

"Can't even give more painkiller. Poor thing. And no hope of survival."

"God forbid, but if ever I am in such a situation, I would prefer death I think."

"Stop it, both of you," the doctor interjected. "Our job is to ensure that she spends her last few days in the most comfortable manner possible. I will not have you talking such things. Here, change the dosage as per what I have written. She might feel a little better. Take care of her. I will go and see her husband."

The nurses looked down, a little embarrassed, and kept quiet. The doctor went out to meet Ria's father and the nurses began reading the changes suggested by him and changing the drips accordingly.

Ria continued to stare through the slit, looking at the nurses adjusting the amount of medicine going into her mother's body through the various pipes connected to her wrists.

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Her mother groaned a little as the tubes attached to her wrist moved. The nurses continued their work oblivious to her pain and groans. The machines continued to blink and beep.

Both the nurses went to their room after a quick recheck that all was as per the doctor's instructions. They had been staying in the room adjacent to the master bedroom. It was earlier the study and had now been converted into the nurses' room by moving two spare beds into it.

As the door shut behind the nurses, Ria slowly came out from behind the curtains. She looked at her mother. The dark circles under her eyes, her rough skin, the cap on her head, the wires and tubes attached to her. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she touched her mother's hand and fingers.

"Why don't you get up? Why don't you come and play with your fairy? I want to hear your stories and make you laugh," she whispered through her sobs.

She saw the photograph on the mantle. It was from their last beach vacation. Her mother had got matching blue dresses for both of them. They had run and played on the sand, rolled among the waves and then slept under the morning sun. They both had built castles and collected shells, marvelled at the beauty of the sky, and splashed through the waves. Her mother had looked so beautiful, so young. Ria had never imagined that in only a few months her mother would become so weak and fragile.

Ria bent down and kissed her mother's forehead, careful not to disturb any of the tubes.

Her mother slowly opened her eyes.

"You are awake, Mama," she cried in delight, wiping away her tears. Perhaps God had finally listened to her. Perhaps her fairy godmother was somewhere in the room, invisible to her eyes.

"Thank you, fairy godmother," whispered Ria, looking up towards the ceiling. "Mama, I knew you would be okay. I knew the nurses were not right," said Ria, her eyes bright and shining, as she pressed her mother's hand between hers.

"Ouch," said her mother slowly through the oxygen mask. "You are hurting me baby."

Ria quickly moved back.

Her mother had closed her eyes again.

"Mama, shall I tell you the story that I read yesterday?"

There was no response.

"I hate this pain. I wish I were dead," came a whisper from her mother.

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Ria kissed her on the forehead again, hoping for the same miracle. Nothing, except a groan.

“I wish I were…” her mother’s voice trailed off.

Ria looked at the sad expression on her mother’s face. The wrinkles on her forehead. A tear came out of her eyes.

“I don’t want you to feel this pain, Mama. I don’t,” she said, as she kissed her mother one last time. Then she slowly stepped back towards the switches to which the machines were connected.

“Goodbye, Mama. Your fairy will grant your wish.”

Less than an hour later, Ria was sitting in her room. She could hear a lot of movement and voices in the house. The others had realised what had happened. Ria’s father came to her room and sat down slowly on the bed, by her side. Tears were streaming down his face.

“I am sorry, my baby,” he said, trying his best to speak without breaking down completely. “Mama has left us. She has gone to heaven to be with God now.”

He hugged Ria tightly giving and seeking comfort at the same time.

“I know Papa. It happened because of me. I am Mama’s fairy so I had to grant her, her last wish. Now, she will be my fairy mother and grant my wishes when I am in need.”

Her father gave her a confused look, then hugged her again.

“No, my darling. Never think that any of this happened because of you. You are the sweetest child we could ever ask for. As for Mama, she will always be with you as a fairy.”

Ria had no tears left. She was glad she had found her fairy mother. She knew she would never be alone from now on.

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