

Escort

By Chuck Palahniuk

My first day as an escort, my first "date" had only one leg. He'd gone to a bathhouse, to get warm, he told me. And he'd fallen asleep in the steam room, too close to the heating element. He'd been unconscious for hours until some one found him. Until the meat of his left thigh was completely and thoroughly cooked.

He couldn't walk, but his mother was coming from Wisconsin to see him, and the hospice needed someone to cart the two of them around to visit the local tourist sights. Go shopping downtown. See the beach. Multnomah Falls. This was all you could do as a volunteer if you weren't a nurse or a cook or doctor.

You were an escort, and this was the place where young people with no insurance went to die. The hospice name, I don't even remember. It wasn't on any signs anywhere, and they asked you to be discreet coming and going because the neighbors didn't know what was going on in the enormous old house on their street, a street with its share of crack houses and drive-by shootings, still nobody wanted to live next door to this: four people dying in the living room, two in the dining room. At least two people lay dying in each upstairs bedroom and there were a lot of bedrooms. At least half these people had AIDS, but the house didn't discriminate. You could come here and die of anything.

The reason I was there was my job. This meant laying on my back on a creeper with a 200-pound class 8 diesel truck driveline laying on my chest and running down between my legs as far as my feet. My job is I had to roll under trucks as they crept down an assembly line, and I installed these drivelines. Twenty-six drivelines every eight hours. Working fast as each truck moved along, pulling me into the huge blazing hot paint ovens just a few feet down the line.

My degree in Journalism couldn't get me more than five dollars an hour. Other guys in the shop had the same degree, and we joked how liberal arts degrees should include welding skills so you'd at least pick up the extra two bucks an hour our shop paid grunts who could weld. Someone invited me to their church, and I was desperate enough to go, and at the church they had a potted ficus they called a Giving Tree, decorated with paper ornaments, each ornament printed with a good deed you could choose. My ornament said: Take a hospice patient on a date.

That was their word, "date." And there was a phone number.

I took the man with one leg, then him and his mother, all over the area, to scenic viewpoints, to museums, his wheel chair folded up in the back of my fifteen-year-old Mercury Bobcat. His mother smoking, silent. Her son was thirty years old, and she had two weeks of vacation. At night, I'd take her back to her TravelLodge next to the freeway, and she'd smoke, sitting on the hood of my car, talking about her son already in the past tense. He could play the piano, she said. In school, he earned a degree in music, but ended up demonstrating electric organs in shopping mall stores.

These were conversations after we had no emotions left.

I was twenty-five years old, and the next day I was back under trucks with maybe three or four hours sleep. Only now my own problems didn't seem very bad. Just looking at my hands and feet, marveling at the weight I could lift, the way I could shout against the pneumatic roar of the shop, my whole life felt like a miracle instead of a mistake.

In two weeks, the mother was gone home. In another three months, her son was gone. Dead, gone.

I drove people with cancer to see the ocean for their last time. I drove people with AIDS to the top of Mount Hood so they could see the whole world while there was still time.

I sat bedside while the nurse told me what to look for at the moment of death, the gasping and unconscious struggle of someone drowning in their sleep as renal failure filled their lungs with water. The monitor would beep every five or ten seconds as it injected morphine into the patient. The patient's eyes would roll back, bulging and entirely white. You held their cold hand for hours, until another escort came to the rescue or until it didn't matter.

The mother in Wisconsin sent me an afghan she'd crocheted, purple and red. Another mother or grandmother I'd escorted sent me an afghan in blue, green and white. Another came in red, white and black. Granny squares, zigzag patterns. They piled up at one end of the couch until my housemates asked if we could store them in the attic.

Just before he'd died, the woman's son, the man with one leg, just before he'd lost consciousness, he'd begged me to go into his old apartment. There was a closet full of sex toys. Magazines. Leather wear. It was nothing he wanted his mother to find so I promised to throw it all out. So I went there, to the little studio apartment sealed and stale after months empty. Like a crypt, I'd say, but that's not the right word. It sounds too dramatic. Like cheesy organ music. But in fact, just sad. The sex toys and whatnots were just sadder. Orphaned. That's not the right word either, but it's the first word that comes to mind.

The afghans are still boxed and in my attic. Every Christmas a housemate will go look for ornaments and find the afghans, red and black, green and purple, each one a dead person, a son or daughter or grandchild, and whoever finds them will ask if we can use them on our beds or give them to Goodwill. And every Christmas, I'll say, No. I can't say what scares me more, throwing away all these dead children or sleeping with them.

Don't ask me why, I tell people. I refuse to even talk about it. That was all ten years ago. I sold the Bobcat in 1989. I quit being an escort. Maybe because after the man with one leg, after he died, after his sex toys were all garbage bagged, after they were buried in the Dumpster, after the apartment windows were open and the smell of leather and latex was gone, the apartment looked good. The sofa-bed was a tasteful mauve, the walls and carpet, cream. The little kitchen had butcher block counter tops. The bathroom was all white and clean.

I sat there in the tasteful silence. I could've lived there.

Anyone could've lived there.