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No Reason to Stay

A distant sound of alarm seeped into her consciousness. The noise grew in strength and crystalized into an immediate, urgent buzz. Megan unglued her eyes. She wafted through the air, weightless, breathless, clueless, and scared—a runaway zeppelin lost in outer space.

Feeling queasy, Megan grabbed onto her bed and discovered that rather than her, it was the room that floated around in a slow, discordant waltz. Dim light seeped through an opening, enough to see her hospital bed wedged between warped walls and a curtain. The awful yet oddly familiar sound came from above, and it was not the only noise in the room. A subtle wailing behind the curtain on the left and a steady bubbling on the floor to her right—*What are they boiling there?*—added to the cacophony.

Megan drew a deep breath. Sharp pain stabbed her in the ribs, below her left breast. Memories came flooding in:

A junkie leaning over her, blood dripping from the blade of his knife. Hospital ceiling with bright lights. Voices full of intensity. A nurse, poking Megan's arm, shaking her head in frustration.

Stabbed. She got stabbed. Megan reached for her chest but only managed to lift her arm far enough to see it wrapped in bedsheets and tubes of various sizes. Her veins had been long fried by drugs, but apparently some ER wizard managed to stick in a line.

So that's what was beeping: the IV pump. She should've guessed. Megan straightened her arm to keep the fluids running. The alarm stopped. The boiling pot on the floor took over the noise, threatening to overflow

whatever it was cooking.

Megan pressed her wooden tongue against the back of her teeth, searching for some moisture in her parched mouth but found none. She closed her eyes. The very same moment, the alarm went off again. Exasperated, Megan slid her hand over the rough surface of the waffle blanket, trying to find a position for her arm. She could not afford to lose the IV. Absolutely not. The small catheter was a life-giving channel for narcotics, and, boy, she needed them.

She found a bump to rest her elbow on and relaxed. The awful beeping stopped. She closed her eyes again and froze, half-expecting the alarm to go off at any minute, puzzling out her next move.

Megan awoke as she sensed another presence in the room. It took a moment to remember where she was.

A tall lady in scrubs passed by her bed.

“Nurse!” Megan screamed. Her voice sounded like a mere whisper over the kettle’s bubbling, but the night nurse must’ve heard her. She halted at the doorway and pivoted to face Megan.

“Water, please.”

The nurse approached. “Here, honey.”

Megan felt a cold object being placed in her right hand. She raised her hand and spilled some water on her wrist. She gulped what was left in a plastic cup to extinguish the fire in her mouth and handed the cup back. “Thank you. I also need something for pain.”

“In forty minutes, honey.” The nurse disappeared.

Megan closed her eyes, but this time sleep eluded her. By now everyone would be chill in her trap house. Keshawn got the new girl to turn tricks, so they had fixes. The girl was still fresh and desirable, meaning they were set for a while, until the girl slowly morphed into the street trash that no one would touch. *Morphine morphs muffs to muffins*. Megan repeated the wordplay several times in her head. It made no sense, but she liked it.

The nurse came in with syringes and flushed something down Megan’s vein.

“What is it?”

“Dilaudid.”

“How much?”

“One milligram.”

“How often?”

“Every three hours, honey.”

“Can I have it q two, please?”

“You’ll have to talk to the doctors.”

Megan nodded. She must’ve been banged real bad if they gave her hearty doses of narcotics. The last time, when she was hospitalized for an overdose, she only received Ativan. Keshawn, to his credit, came to visit her. He could be an asshole at times, but he always found ways to make money and took care of his girls when they got in trouble. Did her friends know what happened to her? Did they care?

Megan moaned, unable to curl up because of the tubes, her mouth on fire again, her chest aching every time she inhaled. Finally, Dilaudid took the edge off, and she sobbed herself to sleep.

She woke up to the blinding bright light.

“Watch your eyes,” a male voice said.

“Too late,” she whispered, squinting.

“I’m doctor Cory McKnight, a surgical resident here at Memorial,” the voice continued. “How you feeling, Ms. Heilig?”

Megan focused on a tall, blond guy in a white gown over faded blue scrubs. “Like shit. I’m in pain.”

She couldn’t see his face covered with a mask, but the concern in his liquid hazel eyes looked genuine. *Fresh from med school*, Megan decided. Hadn’t seen enough yet. In a year or so, the pain and suffering of the patients will become the norm for him. As if flushed through her veins, a shot of envy poked her in the heart. Cory McKnight wasn’t much older than her but already a doctor. She could’ve been someone too. If not for the drugs, she would’ve graduated from college by now—bachelor of science, environmental studies. Could’ve, would’ve, screwed of...

Dr. McKnight pressed a button on a side rail, and the head of her bed started rising. “Lean forward, please.”

He pulled a stethoscope from the pocket of his gown and placed the membrane on her back. “Deep

breaths, please.”

“I can’t. It hurts too much.”

He removed the stethoscope from his ears. “Can you cough for me?” He looked down to the floor.

Curious, she scooted to the edge of the bed to see the object of his interest.

On the floor by her bed stood a plastic box, hooked up to the wall and to her chest by a system of connecting pipes. The bubbling came from inside the box.

“Cough,” Dr. McKnight ordered.

Megan sucked in some air and cackled out a cry. “It hurts! Is this pipe going inside me?”

“Yep,” he happily agreed. “You have a hole in your lung and the tube sucks air out of your chest to keep you alive.”

“I don’t want to be alive. Not with the pipe sticking out of me.”

“It’s temporary. We’ll pull it out when your lung heals.”

He casually mentioned how lucky she was that the knife missed her heart and kept expanding about importance of her taking deep breaths despite the pain. She was already maxed out on Dilaudid, but he could offer something other than pain shots to help.

He pressed the button on the side rail and flattened the bed. Standing behind the headrail, he took her head in his hands. “I see you’re favoring your left side, but try to sit straight.”

He turned her head right and left, the dry skin of his fingers rubbing her nape.

“Relax.”

His fingers moved to her back, feeling her spine and muscles, deeper and deeper. She wanted to hold onto the bed rails, but he took possession of her arms, wrapped them in front of her in a pretzel, and went on to press on her spine. Her vertebrae cracked as if they were finger knuckles. She arched involuntarily, and he continued to work his way through her shoulder blades and to her ribcage. When he got too close to her chest tube, she gnashed her teeth not to scream.

“Okay. Let’s go back.” He held her tubing while she reclined, short of breath and exhausted.

“How you feel?”

Hurting would be an honest answer but probably not the one he wanted to hear. “Ah. It’s...let me rest

here for a minute.”

“Yeah-yeah.” He shifted weight from one leg to another and craned forward, waiting for something, then changed his mind and turned to leave. “Okay. I’ll check on you later.”

At noon a group of three nurses came in and pulled the curtain dividing the room. Megan got a first look at her neighbor. A tiny, folded creature lay propped on pillows and gazed into open space with clouded eyes. No brain lived behind those eyes. The nurses turned the cripple from one side to another, changing bed sheets and pads from underneath her. The poor thing had tubes going into every natural hole in her body, including her anus, plus some unnatural places, like the one sticking out of her stomach.

The team of nurses worked in silence, the futility of their efforts betrayed by their mechanical movements, their stooped shoulders and listless arms. The head nurse took the bandages off the cripple’s back, and Megan turned away.

When curiosity got the best of her, she sneaked a peek and immediately regretted her nosiness. Deep red and yellow wounds covered the cripple’s back. The largest one above the buttocks had a white bone sticking out and looked particularly nasty. The nurse smeared some ointment on the wounds and covered them with fresh gauze. The cripple, who lay quiet for the most part, started crying in the high-pitched voice of a small animal scared for its life.

Megan felt solidarity with her roommate. They both were a drain on society. All the money and resources should’ve gone to a cancer or a cardiac patient, someone who had a chance of getting better. Instead it was wasted on the cripple and her, the people with no future who would be better off dead.

Cory McKnight returned in the afternoon with another masked doctor, whom he introduced as his attending, Dr. Lasseaux.

What are you attending? Besides all-you-can-eat buffets? Megan itched to ask the pudgy, bald doctor, so tightly cocooned in his white gown that she expected the buttons to start flying at the slightest gyration of his corpulent frame.

The two doctors studied the canister on the floor. Cory mentioned the chest tube, followed by some medical jargon, discussion of her X-rays, and finally another hurried patter of medical terminology. The more incomprehensible he talked, the better she understood how much trouble she was in.

Dr. Lasseaux listened with his beady eyes fixed on some invisible target, but the last bit of medical abracadabra perked him up. “How is your pain?” he asked Megan.

“Bad.”

Seeing disappointment in Cory’s eyes, she corrected herself, “I felt better after the massage, but now the pain is back.”

Dr. Lasseaux half turned towards his resident. “Massage?”

Cory cleared his throat. “The spine realignment and manipulative therapy I was telling you about.”

Dr. Lasseaux shifted his gaze from his resident to Megan. She couldn’t tell if the irony in his eyes was about Cory or her. She waited for him to talk, trying to decide how frightened she should feel. Not saying a word, Dr. Lasseaux gave Megan a thumbs-up, turned around, and left. Cory ran after him.

“Thanks for explaining things to me, guys,” Megan whispered to their backs.

For lunch Megan ordered grilled chicken with string beans and a garden salad. The smell of real food awakened the hungry beast inside her. Unaccustomed to big meals, she felt full half way through, but kept on eating out of habit, for no food should go to waste. She had no room left for chocolate ice cream, which tasted so good she nibbled anyway, taking her time to savor the dainty until the very last drop of sweet slush.

In the late afternoon, Cory came back for a surprise third visit. He went through the same routine of cracking her spine to produce an alarming yet strangely satisfying pop. All her vertebrae accounted, he folded her arms while pressing on her back and ribcage. Ticklish, she squirmed under his petting hands. He held her tube for her to turn, and she held her breasts, so he could find her muscles. Far from relaxing and at times painful, the massage nonetheless brought a weird feeling of comfort, an enjoyment of sorts, a high a dog must feel when the master runs his hand through its coat.

“I want you to rest and later sit in a chair,” he said.

She couldn’t see his face, but she detected little shiny moves in his gaze. He stood with his feet firmly planted, chest puffed up and heaving to the rhythm of his breath. Proud of his accomplishment, he enjoyed the

massage on his end more than she did on hers.

“What chair?” she asked.

He looked around. “I’ll tell them to bring you one.”

She could tell by his eyes he was smiling underneath the mask.

The chair arrived in the evening, brought by a physical therapist with ruffled, blond hair and a nametag: Chelsea. The pain shot wasn’t due yet, but a pill was, and after swallowing her Percocet, Megan got out of bed for the first time. Dizzy, she had to hold onto Chelsea. After a brief moment of unsteady panic, she made it to the chair and sat down. She watched TV, unperturbed for hours, one soap opera after another, like she used to on the weekends back in the day. As unrealistic and unrelatable as the shows were, they aroused a weird feeling of nostalgia, some sort of yearning she didn’t know she had inside. Apparently the drugs that were destroying her body didn’t penetrate deep enough to kill the last vestiges of humanity hiding in the dark corners of her soul. Glued to the screen, Megan relived her first kiss, the endless fun of family trips to the Jersey shore, the despair of losing her mother to cancer, the unfettered promise of college life, and the brutal disappointment of its aftermath.

The very last sitcom about a pair of high school sweethearts building their future together and fighting for their love against steep odds brought tears to Megan’s eyes. She missed it all: the good, the bad, the dull, and the extraordinary. But more than anything else in the world, she missed being loved.

After dinner, Megan finally got back in bed. She didn’t sleep well at night, her wound bothering her, one bad dream giving way to another. In the morning, a new nurse unhooked Megan from all her lines and helped her to the bathroom. She took her time with the wash, combed her hair in front of the mirror, and rubbed skin lotion on her pruney face. Her second day at the hospital, she definitely felt stronger.

She was eating breakfast when Cory showed up.

“I can come back later,” he said.

“No, it’s okay.” Megan pushed her table away. “You’re busy and I have the whole day.”

“How is your pain?” He asked, studying the bubbling canister on the floor.

“Better,” she lied.

“Glad to hear it,” he said enthusiastically. “We’ll work again on your muscles and dermatomes today.”

“My what?”

“Your skin areas where the pain travels via your nerves.”

He listened to her lungs and then went through her dermatomes like a professional piano player giving a solo concert. A grateful instrument, she presented her back and sides so he wouldn't miss a note.

“The manipulative therapy helps to relieve muscle spasms and pain,” he explained when he finished.

“Uh-huh.” Megan writhed in bed to get comfortable. “Thanks.”

“Have you tried rehab?” Cory asked out of the blue while sanitizing his hands with a gel from a dispenser on a wall.

To her glee, Megan detected a bat-squeak of sympathetic curiosity in his voice.

“Yep.”

“And?”

“They tortured me for a month: Suboxone, talking, drawing, and watching some motivational shit. I finally got out, found me some krokodil to end my sufferings.”

“Krokodil?”

“The shit that burns your skin. Cheaper than fentanyl but leaves marks. After a while you look like a crocodile.”

She pulled down her gown as if he could see her legs under the bedsheets. She used to be proud of her dancer's legs. Not any more. Years of addiction turned her arms and legs into a battleground filled with pockmarks, scars, and discolorations.

“Should've stayed longer.” He waved his hands in the air to dry them.

“What for? They'd kick me out sooner or later. I have nowhere to go but back on the streets.”

He hummed a non-committal noise. His eyes lingered on her, and Megan thought she saw an appraisal, some sort of calculation in their depth. He tilted his head back, as if he wanted to say something but changed his mind.

“See you in the afternoon, Ms. Heilig.”

“I'll be here. Thanks for the massage.”

Days went by and Megan settled into the hospital routine. An hour at a hospital stretches beyond sixty minutes, but she didn't mind the monotony. Pain shots and pills around the clock, chest X-rays in the mornings, one hour of sitting in the chair, three meals, and massages twice a day. Although painful at times, the petting sessions carried a strong undertone of comfort. Being touched, whether fondled by her mother, hugged by friends, or cuddled together with the love of her life, were the sweetest memories she had. Who would've thought that of all the senses dulled by the drugs, it was the warmth of human touch that she missed the most.

On occasion she was asked to blow into a gizmo called incentive spirometer. She could not figure out what the incentive was, but it made Cory happy when she showed him the power of her lungs. In the remaining time, she binge-watched TV, one show sillier than the next, and none other than her favorite high school sweetheart drama even remotely believable. Still, she couldn't help but wonder what would happen to the characters: would the bride-to-be figure out obvious clues that her fiancé was cheating on her, or would an orphaned refugee reunite with his biological family? She stopped thinking about the streets, her squatting place, and fellow junkies. They had the routine of their own and not a one that any sane person would like to go back to. Sure her chest hurt, but she wasn't in withdrawal hell. She could get used to the hospital for however long the hole in her lung would take to heal.

The individual attention Megan drew from Cory did not go unnoticed. A patient is lucky to get a few minutes out of the doctor's busy schedule, but Megan received ten-minute massages twice a day. On a few occasions a nurse or a nursing assistant "accidentally" walked in during a session, curiosity written on their faces, and one day a nursing student dropped in to observe. Basketball-tall, she stood wide-eyed, her mouth agape behind the facemask while Cory explained to her the benefits of manipulative therapy. The student nodded frantically, with her mouth still open, and Megan tried hard not to laugh at the attentive giraffe.

Someone must've jinxed her, for the next morning when she asked for a pain shot, the nurse said her Dilaudid had been discontinued.

"But I still have this pipe sticking out," Megan protested, pointing to her chest tube.

The nurse, a small Asian lady, shrugged. "I know. Ask your doctor. Do you want your Percocet?"

“You bet I want my Percocet.”

The pill tasted bitter, with an added tinge of betrayal as an aftertaste.

Soon after, Cory walked in, visibly tired, to the point he forgot to tie up his mask. He wasn't bad looking, his fleshy face tapering in a strong jaw emphasized by morning stubble, but not as handsome as she had imagined. In an apologetic tone he announced that because of the call last night, he had to go home to rest, and she assumed he wouldn't pet her. To hide her disappointment, she proffered her most placid smile, while studying his face for the signs of guile.

His phone twittered. He pulled it out of his breast pocket, raised his eyebrows, shook his head ever so slightly, and dropped the phone back in his pocket. She opened her mouth to administer a verbal lashing about her pain shots when he motioned for her to sit up in bed. Her heart jumped in the air and did a little heel-click. She was getting the massage after all. Forget the guile. He could've gone straight home to rest, but instead he stopped by to pet her.

In a rush to sit, she yanked on the IV tubing and almost pulled out her precious line. She untangled her tubes, wrapped bed sheets around her waist to hide the unsightly marks on her legs, and hung them over the edge of the bed.

He worked in silence. She relaxed to let him wrap, twist, and play her body. The up-tempo rhythm of his fingers on her flesh penetrated muscles and reverberated between her shoulder blades with some steady beat. *Tango*, Megan decided.

She itched to ask him about his place, but that would be too nosy and show him her interest. Still, she couldn't help but imagine what would happen if he took her home. He could pet her all he wanted, whenever he chose to. She'd be a good dog. She'd bring him slippers and wouldn't bark or chew on furniture.

He could talk to her or play with her or do whatever, for any of it would be better than the treatment she'd get on the streets. She'd get high after he left for work, but she'd be awake and happy when he came back home. And if she could taper off her drugs, she might be able to kick her habit. God as her witness, she never wanted to be a junkie. It was just that she never stumbled upon a boundary she didn't want to cross. None of those boundaries came with a price tag, and if they did, she was too rebellious, too wayward and stupid to heed the warnings. Three years of misery cleared the fog in her head but left her sundered and diminished.

Diminished but not finished. Megan grinned. If only she could walk away from the wreckage that was her life and glue together the pieces of her former self, she'd go back to college and maybe she too would become a doctor one day. She was only twenty-one after all.

Done, Cory went to the antiseptic dispenser on the wall. Rubbing his hands together, he turned to face her. "I'm sorry to tell you, Ms. Heilig, but if the hole in your lung won't close on its own, you will need surgery."

"Surgery? Who's doing it? You?"

"No, Dr. Lassaux. I'm just an intern."

"Is it painful?"

"Yes. We should be able to do VATS—that's an operation through a couple of small holes between your ribs, but you'll have more pain afterwards I'm afraid."

"Will you give me back the pain shots you cut?"

"We may have to," he admitted with a bashful smile.

Seeing his unmasked face light up for the first time warmed her heart. He was very handsome, handsome and more, the more being an unexpected touch of humility that added to his allure. She wanted to tell him how much she appreciated his attention and compassionate care but couldn't find a good way to put it.

"...even though I'd like to get you off drugs," he added.

"You would?"

Instead of replying, he went pensive and let the answer hang unspoken in the air.

Say it. Say that you want to help me, and I will be yours, she mentally begged him, but apparently he, too, had a hard time finding the right words.

"How long will I have to stay after the surgery?" she asked.

"It depends." He raised his arms and let them fall in surrender. "Your lung will have to heal, which may still take a couple of weeks."

"Okay," she blurted and immediately cursed herself for her mindless alacrity. She should've bought more time, asked to think about the surgery or put up some resistance. The way she expressed her readiness, they'd probably drag her to the operating room tomorrow. Still, a few more weeks at the hospital resort didn't sound bad.

Cory left and Megan tried to watch TV. She still felt phantom impressions of his fingers on her ribcage, saw him smiling, thinking, struggling for words. The sitcoms played extra crusty, to the point she turned off the TV and called the nurse to help her get up. Her canister and IV unhooked, she wandered aimlessly on the floor to the cheering of the physical therapist of dubious gender, who came to check on her. Happy for a break, the therapist pulled their smart phone and sauntered off, talking in a low voice, fluttering their false eyelashes.

To take her mind off Cory, Megan went to the solarium. In the sunless, drab room, stuffed with long tables, she shuffled from one floor plant to another. She ran her fingers against the smooth leaves and rough branches at each stop. The plants were real but had no smell, which somehow disappointed her. What did she expect of the houseplants in November? Stranger yet was the fact that in the sterile, antiseptic-soaked atmosphere of the hospital, she craved some natural scent. Where did that come from? She was never into aromas after all.

Cory would like it if I wore perfume and makeup. The realization put a smile on her face. For the first time in years someone saw her as a human being and not just a humanoid object defined by its drug addiction. If a person as smart and charming as Cory believed in her, she should take the hint and resurrect her fighting spirit. She used to be a competitive ballroom dancer. A broken leg, false accusations, mother's death—she'd gone through some rough patches in her life and bounced back. Until the final betrayal from the man she loved which started the death spiral. The drugs not only took away her health and looks, they also destroyed her will and poisoned her self-esteem, but according to Cory, she was not a hopeless case immured into the inevitable.

Megan pressed her fingers against a prickly edge of a thick leaf. *Get you off drugs,* Cory's voice, his confident, roaring *arrh* inflection rang in her ears. She fought the urge to rip off her chest tube and IV, to sever all connections to the sickly drug addict she'd become and pretend, if only for a moment, that she was already cured from her disease and could function as a normal human being in the world outside the hospital walls. The leaf's sharp point penetrated her skin, but instead of pulling back, Megan squeezed her fingers and snapped the frond in half. She took a slow, deep breath to control her anger and left the solarium, sucking blood mixed with sap from her thumb like a three-year-old.

When she reached her room, Megan had to wait outside to let the paramedics take away her neighbor.

The cripple rolled out fastened to the gurney, huddled yet twisted, her contracted limbs sticking out at impossible angles of a broken puppet doll, her mouth puckered into an idiotic smile.

A ridiculous pang tugged at Megan's heart, as if the paramedics snatched away her close friend or someone she cared about. "Where are you taking her?" she asked a long-faced, skinny man clad in an EMT uniform.

"To her nursing home. She's all cured now." He chortled exultantly.

Megan smiled. "... easy making fun of others. Save your laughs for your own misfortunes."

The EMT's grin vanished, replaced with a scowl.

The paramedics left and Megan finally went back to bed. The nurse handed her the TV remote, but Megan wasn't interested. She already had a show playing inside her head. She must've watched too much TV to come up with the idea of Cory and her. Still, once planted in her brain, the seed of hope grew into a lavish fantasy that would rival any TV production. In her mind she and Cory were married with a brood of children and a thriving medical practice. Only she wasn't an ecologist or a physician. She was an influencer, running a podcast and making frequent TV appearances, lobbying to ban drugs, each and every one of them. She stood for a total ban with no exceptions, mandatory testing, and maximum prison terms. No measure went too far when it came to ridding society of the drug scourge, the worst kind of poison ever invented by mankind.

By the end of the day Megan became a congresswoman, and her universal drug ban had cleaned up the land. *Tomorrow I'll run for presidency.* Megan laughed so hard, her chest started hurting. She asked for Percocet and went to sleep happy.

In the morning Megan woke up with an ache in her chest. She must've lain the wrong way in her sleep and inadvertently nudged the chest tube.

After breakfast she went back to the restroom. In front of the mirror she wet a stubborn tress, smoothed it against her skull, and checked her reflection. The girl in the mirror didn't look half bad. Days of skin lotion therapy had healed her chapped hands and restored the healthy glow to her face, to the point where she started

to look her age again.

For the finishing touch to her morning toilette, Megan nibbled on her lips to bring out their natural redness and applied several layers of chapstick, breathing in its cherry flavor. Satisfied with her moist pout, she jumped back in bed to wait for Cory.

He showed up late, dressed in a shirt and tie instead of his usual scrubs. With him came Dr. Lasseaux, and they both expressed satisfaction with the progress she'd made. What progress? Her lung appeared expanded on X-ray, and the air leak in the canister had stopped. Cory turned the valve on the wall, and the bubbling ceased. The deafening silence made her think she'd lost her hearing. Too astounded to ask questions, Megan looked at the doctors for clues.

"How's the pain?" Dr. Lasseaux addressed no one.

"Five days of manipulative therapy drastically reduced narcotics use," Cory answered. "She's only the fourth patient I tried it on—and the first poly-substance user— but I think it works."

The familiar ironic sparkle lightened Dr. Lasseaux' eyes. "What's 'drastically?' You need a numeric scale. I hope you realize you'll have to write a research protocol and get an IRB approval if you want to collect, not to mention publish, any data."

Cory deflated.

"Glad you're doing better," Dr. Lasseaux told Megan.

He and Cory turned around and left.

No massage today, Megan realized, chewing the cherry flavor off her lips. She tried to look for positives, found none, and rang for the nurse, asking her to unhook the tubes. Stupid-stunned, she wandered around the floor, holding onto her now useless canister. She thought of going to the solarium but decided to stay close to her room to keep an eye on the door. In her heart still lingered a prickly hope that Cory might return to massage her, although in her head she knew he wouldn't.

Cory came back before lunch, carrying gauze pads and instruments in his hands. The gullible child inside her rejoiced that he'd returned to pet her because he didn't have time in the morning. Because he cared.

Wrong. He'd come to pull out her chest tube.

"Is it gonna hurt?" she asked.

“No. You’ll feel so much better afterwards. Turn to your side, please.”

She scanned his liquid eyes for signs of sympathy and found nothing but impatience. He had somewhere to go, and she was holding him up.

“Deep breath,” Cory commanded behind her back.

The procedure felt weird, as if some octopus was spreading its tentacles inside her, looking for places to hide.

“Done,” he announced.

She turned to see him holding the tube, some pinkish, thin fluid dripping from its hollow tip. He carried the tube to the trash bin. For a moment he looked like the old Cory, happy and cheerful, but a few seconds later he put the instruments into the disposal container on the wall and ran to the door.

“I’ll see you later, Ms. Heilig,” he said, not even turning his head to look at her.

Lunch arrived, an island of mystery meat floating in a pool of gravy. She took a bite and went straight to the chocolate cake.

She remained in bed after lunch. Massage or not, Cory would probably have time in the afternoon to stop by. He did say he’d see her later, after all.

Her pain wasn’t better without the tube. She’d been so distraught in the morning, she forgot to ask for Percocet. As it turned out, after her chest pipe was removed, so were her narcotics. Megan didn’t have the mental strength to protest the injustice to her nurse. She took useless Tylenol and spent the rest of the day in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying not to think about Cory, the streets, her trap house.

The night was miserable, despite more Tylenol and a sleeping pill. Her stomach, gouged out like a jack-o’-lantern, itched and ached. By the time the light of dawn entered the room, Megan began to feel the unendurable heat of withdrawal building up under her skin.

She got up in the morning, her body on fire, her blood curdled into Jell-O, gut twisted into a Chinese knot. In the bathroom, cold water burned her skin rather than soothed it.

She didn’t feel like eating her breakfast. Tubeless and untethered, she dragged herself to the nursing station and screamed at her LPN as if it was the nurse’s fault that her Percocet had been discontinued. With the stoic expression of a parent facing a child’s tantrums, the nurse picked up the phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“The operator. They’ll page your doctor.”

“Well, can you give me some xanies or whatever sleeping shit you gave me last night?”

The nurse checked the computer. “I see you have Ativan ordered. I’ll bring you the pill when you go back to your room.” A bargain: get out of my face, and I’ll give you your reward.

The tiny pill of Ativan arrived shortly.

“Do you still want me to call your doctor?” the stone-faced nurse asked.

“No.”

Megan crawled back to her bed. She curled into a ball of misery, as if the fetal position was going to help her wrenching cramps, and waited. Waited for Cory. Waited for him to show up and tell her how much he cared about her and how happy they would be together.

It didn’t take long to discover that physical pain and wishful thinking don’t mesh well. She was waiting for Godot to come and liberate her in the last act of the Theatre of the Absurd that was her life. In the real world she was a research project, a Pavlovian dog to prove a point and publish the results in a scientific journal, except she didn’t quite reach the level of a dog. Her value and likability were more of a guinea pig. What a joke to ask your researcher to take you home and turn you into a household pet. How was he gonna explain her to his girlfriend? Or leave her his keys, knowing she’d steal and sell his stuff to feed her habit?

She imagined his face if she brought up the idea to him, what he might say.

You want to come and stay with me? A doctor and a junkie, eh? In which movie did you see that? Oh, I know, *Pretty Woman*. Not the same plot exactly but close enough. Oh, don’t cry, Ms. Heilig. No, no, no. Ah, look at that. The guinea pig has feelings.

Megan wiped a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand. The guinea pig deserved every bit of the treatment it received. What made her think she’d be able to bridge the ocean that divided her and Cory’s existences? How stupid of her to hold off on pain medication just to make Cory McKnight happy. What the f* did she care about his research or his happiness? The world didn’t give a f* about her.

Megan jumped out of bed, bent double to fight off abdominal cramps, and labored to the nursing station.

Seeing her coming, the nurse braced herself against the desk.

“I want out of here,” Megan announced.

“Let me call your doctor. If you have a reason to stay—”

“F* the doctors,” Megan interrupted. “I don’t need your reasons. I need drugs. Give me the papers to sign. I’m leaving.”

“AMA?”

“Whatever.”

Megan went back to her bed, to her fetal position and masochistic indulgence of self-loathing. It took another ruckus, this time with the nurse and her supervisor, but twenty minutes later she signed Against Medical Advice forms, signed without reading them. She donned her stinky street clothes, those pathetic rags of shame soaked in other people’s excrement and her own bitter disappointment, collapsed on the bed, pressed her face against the pillow, and let the tears flow.

The nurse rolled her in a wheelchair to the hospital entrance. Cars and minivans, their engines running, lined up on the hospital’s entrance ramp. The fumes from their exhausts made Megan gag. The gray, teary sky covered by mud clouds promised rain. A wind gust pierced her like a cold blade. She pulled up her legs and wrapped her arms around her knees, feeling like a boiling pot shoved in a fridge without warning.

If sitting hurt her belly, standing up proved unbearable. Her stomach refused to uncoil, and Megan had to hold onto the wheelchair’s handles in order not to collapse. Why did they need a wheelchair if they knew she’d have to walk on her own once outside? All the production to prove that they care, when in reality they didn’t give a shit if she went around the corner, fell, and broke her neck. As long as it happened outside the hospital’s doors, it wasn’t their responsibility.

Megan waited out the bout of pain, took a deep breath, and let go.

The nurse rolled back to the warmth of the hospital building. “Stay safe,” she said over her shoulder.

Megan sneered. “Yeah, right.”

She took another breath of crisp November air mixed with the fumes. Winter was around the corner. She’d have to fight for her favorite panhandling spot by Costco’s vents to stay warm. Kind shoppers would give her food and spare change. At the end of a day she’d drag herself to a squatting place strewn with broken junk,

stained mattresses, torn cushions, and homeless trash in all shades of depravity. She'd buy a fix with the money in her cup and black out. There'd be a day she'd wake up pregnant, not remembering when or how she got raped. The baby wouldn't survive the daily drug assault, so she'd be back at the hospital for an abortion. Then one day she wouldn't wake up at all, and her misery would be over.

Megan tramped towards Camden's skyline. The ground underfoot crunched with dead leaves as she walked down Haddon Avenue. A few times she had to stop in the middle of a street to wait out her chest pain or stomach cramps. At the corner of Haddon and Baird, she leaned against a blackened-by-fire wall of an abandoned house with caved-in roof to catch her breath. A familiar scent of urine mingled with asbestos and decay hit her nose. A barely audible "no" escaped her lips. She pushed against the wall and, instead of downtown, headed to the Cooper River Park.

On the outskirts of the park, two female joggers, both about her age, came from behind and whiffed by, chatting and gesticulating despite the brisk pace of their run. Megan gazed at their oscillating backs until they disappeared around a curve and continued on her way across the grass-covered riverfront. She reached the water and plunged onto a bench, short of breath and gasping. The air came served with a faint tang of wet hay—not the freshness she hoped for, but a natural smell nonetheless.

A long boat eased into view, propelled by a team of four boys rowing in unison, their synchronized movement undoubtedly a result of many hours of practice. Megan huddled on the cold, soggy wood, still watching the boat and listening to the susurrations of the waves it created. Out of nowhere resurfaced a long-forgotten memory of her family's trip to Florida. She, her parents, and sister all went on the sunset cruise in Fort Lauderdale, and Mother got sick, a combination of waves and engine exhaust from the boat. Back then they didn't know yet that Mother had metastatic breast cancer, but maybe it contributed to her sickness as well. Oblivious to what the future held for them, they enjoyed quality time together on what turned out to be their last trip as a family.

Megan got up. She picked up two large stones by the riverbank and stuffed them in the pockets of her baggy pants. Inhaling stertorously through her parched mouth, she climbed the rump to the bridge, fighting gravity, the wind, the excruciating stomach pain.

The sun peeked from behind the clouds and lit the scenery: the transparent blue of the sky over the

rustling, red-and-yellow trees lining the riverbanks. Halfway over the bridge, Megan glared down the dark carob waters of Cooper River. She smiled. Holding onto her pockets to make sure the rocks wouldn't fall out, she climbed over the low rail.

The sun went back into hiding. Invariably, the Earth gloomed down. Behind her, a passing car honked a long distress call that cut through the air with the urgency of a falling guillotine. The screech of tires on the asphalt added to the drama.

“Wait!” yelled a male voice.

In an instant, Megan became queasy at the sound of familiar intonation. She froze, unsure whether her ears were playing tricks on her, unwilling to believe, unable not to. A short but violent confrontation between reason and feelings ended in a decisive victory for the latter. Megan turned her head.

A fat guy, clad in a grey hoodie over sweatpants rolled towards her in a hurried penguin waddle. His creamy car parked crookedly on the sidewalk, engine running, beeped an open-door alarm.

“Still hopeful, aren't you, guinea pig?” Megan muttered to herself.

“Wait!” The guy halted and extended his arm, his palm facing her.

“What for?” She looked up to the sky. “No reason to stay.”

The sun reappeared from behind the clouds and immediately slid back, as if practicing the game of hide-and-seek. Clever. Megan closed her eyes and stepped from the bridge.