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Renal

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Renal

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Amanda Zubrowski

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“Remember these four liquids.” The head nurse at Vanderbilt hospital spoke over her shoulder as she walked swiftly through the triage section of the Emergency Room. “Piss. Puke. Blood. Shit. You will deal with on a daily basis. Get used to it. Embrace it.” Behind her, a pack of nursing students in pink and blue scrubs followed and sniggered. “Oh yeah. Go ahead. Laugh. You won’t be laughing in 15 minutes when you’re covered in one, if not all of those things.”

“I thought shit was solid,” a student in pink scrubs whispered to one in blue.

Patricia leaned on the counter at the nurse’s station and waited for the lead nurse’s rebuttal, but the pack was out of ear shot before she could hear her.

“If only she knew.” Emily muttered sitting at one of the station’s chairs, typing frantically into the computer at her station. “This is my fourth pair of scrubs today.”

Patricia turned away from the hall that previously held all the students and toward Emily. Her stomach brushed against the station counter and she smiled to herself.

“I still can’t get used to that,” Emily said, looking Patricia up and down. “When are you going to stop with the shifts anyway? Seriously, Pat, you are about to pop. Amniotic fluid was not on that list of fluids to embrace.”

Pat touched her swollen stomach, and looked down, unable to see her feet under her. She was just a green lump from the chest down.

“Tonight is my last shift, actually.”

“You’re such a lucky pregnant bitch,” Emily said as she turned back to the computer screen. Patricia laughed.

“I’ll be back in 8 weeks,” Patricia answered, picking up her stack of patient folders for rounds. “As mean and as sleep deprived as ever.”

“Just like the good old days. And you better not take all of that maternity leave. If I get stuck with that cheerleading nurse as one of my students and you aren’t here to diffuse the situation, it will be her blood that we are cleaning up.”

“I’ll be here,” Patricia said as she headed towards one of the emergency rooms. From the slightly open door, she heard a groan, a heave, and a splash.

“One more for the road,” Emily said through a smirk. Patricia gave her the finger, before pasting on a smile and going into the room.

November 2012

Life was a game of numbers. A certain heart gets a certain amount of beats, no matter what. Lungs, a certain amount of breaths. Blinks. Thoughts. All unique to the system of which they belong. There's no stopping it. No saving it. You get what you get and that's it.

This reminder seemed constant to Patricia as she filled her lungs with one of those numbered breaths, one mixed with nicotine, as she sat in the driver's seat of her car, watching the digital clock switch from 8:55 to 8:56 am. Her shift started in four minutes. It would take two to walk through the doors. One to put her coat in her locker and pin her name tag on the left breast pocket of her scrubs. 30 seconds to clock in. More of her ever dwindling heart beats and breaths taken. She inhaled deeply and exhaled the smoke through her nose. Stubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray, she turned off her car and opened her door into the hospital parking lot that was nearly filled to capacity with the cars of all the day shifters.

She looked straight ahead of her through the doors to the elevator. As she pushed the up arrow, a collection of nurses was gathering near her. A grouping of pink, blue, green matching tops and bottoms. White shoes.

The doors to the elevator slid open with a small "ding" and Patricia put herself in the corner, pushing the button for the 5th floor. She was going to make her way to a back corner when one of the other nurses blocked her from her social safe haven. A brunette with thin wire glasses smiled at her as he adjusted the black satchel he had across his chest and pressed himself against the wall right next to her, so others could get on.

"What floor?" she asked.

"Five, same as you," he said through the smile.

She just nodded. Five more nurses got on; five more smiles that asked her to push four different numbers. She was now in the very front of the elevator with no hope of moving. The doors slid closed with another ding, and with a small jolt, they all headed up and off to their respective floors.

Patricia finally reached her floor, the same floor that the male nurse with thin wire glasses got off on.

“This floor can be so disheartening,” he said loud enough for her to hear, “It’s my first day and I am already feeling the depression in the air.”

“Yeah,” she answered as she kept walking, her back straight, and her eyes on the glass doors with “Kidney Dialysis” in large black letters, only mere yards away. She rolled her eyes as she heard the up and down jingle of his satchel. He was half heartedly jogging to catch up to her. She only took her eyes off the door and looked over at him when she heard him huff. He smiled at her again. She did not return one.

“Jaysen,” he offered his hand for a handshake, Patricia stuck out her hand and met his vigorous handshake with a cold limp wrist. When he released her hand, she turned back to the door and picked up the pace. Jaysen matched her, step for step. He would take turns looking ahead to the unit to looking at her and smiling. She could see him out of the corner of her eye and stared ahead, hoping he would lose interest in the polite “first day” conversation. When they reached the door, he took a few steps so he could pull the door open for her. He did so with the same smile on his face.

“Thank you,” she offered, as she breezed past him through the reception area, to the break room.

“My pleasure,” he returned, once again talking to her back. Patricia was doing perfect for time as she closed her locker door. Unfortunately, Jaysen was standing in the break room door, blocking her way out.

“So are you always this quiet and standoffish or did I catch you on a particularly good day?” he asked her.

“Particularly good day,” she answered as she approached him. He kept his stance and raised his eyebrows at her, hoping to break whatever “head nurse” façade she was trying to hold on to. “Excuse me,” she offered. After a few seconds, he slid slowly out of the door way, just enough that there were a few inches of air between them. She made her way through slowly, subtly sucking in her stomach so that she did not risk any part of her making contact with him. He turned to face her, still smiling, as she brushed down her scrubs in the hallway.

“Do note that that can be taken as workplace hostility and sexual harassment.” She turned before he could respond, but she was able to catch the smile leave his face.

The list of appointments was already printed and Patricia’s first appointment was in three minutes. She looked over his stats. “Walter Cox. 83. Treatment Initiated: December 2010.” Patricia shook her head. A year on the list and 83 years old was not a good combination for an early morning patient. As she mentally prepared herself for what was sure to come, the clinic door opened, and she heard him before she saw him.

“Dammit Mary, my kidneys are failing, I am not crippled. I can open my own damn door and I can push my own damn elevator button.” His white tufts of hair were disheveled as he shuffled into the clinic, heading straight towards the counter where Patricia was standing.

“I know you aren’t, I was just helping grandpa,” she answered from behind him. Patricia thought she could be no more than 20. Seeing a black strap to a Jansport book bag confirmed that for her.

“Grandpa, wait. You have to sign in.” she said as this man, who Patricia assumed to be Walter, bypassed Jennifer, the clinic receptionist. Mary stopped at the desk and bent offered to sign the appointment book. Jennifer looked over at Patricia with wide eyes, she hated confrontation and she could feel it coming. Patricia nodded.

“I am here for my appointment,” Walter said to no one in particular. Patricia assumed that since he was heading her direction, he meant for her to know. Before she had the chance to tell him that he was early and she would be with him as soon as she could, Rhoda, an older Dialysis nurse, placed herself in the space between him and the nurses’ station.

“Yes sir, if you want to come with me this way, we will get you set right up and one of our spectacular nurses will take great care of you.” Rhoda flashed him a toothy smile. He snorted at her.

“Sure,” he replied as Rhoda placed her hand lightly on his shoulder to guide him to one of the curtained chairs for his appointment. As he moved with her, Rhoda turned around and flashed the same toothy, fake smile at Patricia. Patricia returned an unenthusiastic stare. Of course Rhoda would save the day; he wasn’t her patient to deal with for the next three hours.

“Hey, he seems as cheery as you do,” Jaysen’s voice caught Patricia off guard. She did her best to keep her back to him as she pulled up and printed out Walter’s information.

“Nothing? Not even a smirk?”

“Look,” Patricia turned towards Jaysen, with an icy stare; she was ready to decimate him on his first day, it would be easier on both of them in the long run.

“Patty, I see you have met our new nurse, Jaysen Spero,” Rhoda had returned from settling in Walter.

“Nice to meet you Patty,” Jaysen stuck out his hand and gave her a smug smile.

Patricia looked from his hand back to her appointment list. “Hello,” she answered back.

“He’ll be shadowing me for the day, and then he can start normal rotation tomorrow. He is here to assist you in anything you might need.”

Patricia looked up to see his smile had grown wider, exaggerated, with his top teeth showing, his cheeks pulled up, dimpled.

She turned back to the computer, picked up Walter’s information from the printer and placed the new statistics it in his ever growing manila folder. She had nearly forgotten about the first client in the clinic as she flipped through the last few months of information, when she heard it.

"You." He raised his voice to a volume louder than acceptable in the unit.

Patricia looked up from his information. Her eyes were greeted by an extended finger which seemed to shake slightly.

"Come here," he motioned with that same finger, as if that could draw her to him. She exhaled, attempting to hide a huff. As she approached, she bent so she could conduct an eye-level conversation with him; she was taught never to make patients feel “inferior” and loom over them.

"Yes," she answered. It came out flat. She looked past him, focusing on the wall behind the age spots in his thin white hair.

"I have things to do today and I do not have the time to sit here while you ladies hem and haw like chickens. I want to get started. Now.”

Patricia let her lips contort into the semblance of a smile and she nodded, and then wordlessly started the diffusion process. "There you go. We will have you out of here as soon as possible." She turned and started back to the station, making sure he could not see her roll her eyes.

"And it stinks in here." He yelled to her, though she was only a few feet away from him.

She turned back to him, unable to muster the stretched smile she had given him moments earlier. "Well sir, we try to maintain a certain level of sterility, and sometimes our patients can find the effects of that, the smell, unappealing," Patricia replied, having answered that question more times that she could count; key words she could utter verbatim. She couldn't smell the antiseptic agents anymore.

"Jesus Christ. I'm paying this place all the money I have, I come here 3 times a week, I sit here for hours at a time, and I'm just a you or a sir. I have a name" Patricia leaned to check the chart. He leaned with her, inches from her face. "And it stinks in here, ma'am," the last word another decibel louder than necessary, and a drop of spit spewed forth landing on Patricia's upper lip.

Patricia wiped her lip, hard enough to leave a red streak. "I'm sorry," she offered glancing at the paperwork, "Walter. Excuse me, Mr. Cox, but the reason we keep it so clean is for the safety of all of those under our care here." She closed the folder with such force that the accompanying gust blew stray hairs from her face.

He pulled his top lip up, revealing purple gums and teeth yellowed with age. "And you stink," he barked, his nostrils flailed to match his accusation, "Cigarettes. Trying to ruin my lungs too?" He looked away from her, but he spoke to insure she could hear him. "Hire these

nurses from a two year vocational school, and that's what you get. They just smoke and stand there, watching us in agony."

Patricia's top teeth grazed her bottom lip, picking up little pieces of dried flesh.

"Mr. Cox, perhaps—" her voice wavered. Behind her, she heard the pull of Velcro which stopped her from continuing. Rhoda came to take Walter's vitals. She smiled at Patricia as she put the cuff around Walter's pasty, freckled arm. Patricia couldn't muster a smile. She just blinked and turned. She walked past the nursing station where Jaysen was standing, watching her. Without looking in his direction, she moved passed the desk, to the break lounge. She flung open her locker and pulled out her pack of cigarettes and her lighter. Her hands were shaking slightly as she stuffed them both into her breast pocket and slammed her locker shut.

She walked by Jaysen who had moved from behind the counter to edge he opened his mouth to speak to her, which she could see out of the corner of her eye. She held her hand up to stop him.

"I'm taking my break," she said to Jennifer, not waiting for an answer before swinging open the glass door and letting it hiss closed behind her. Mary watched from one of the cushioned chairs in the waiting area of the clinic.

She had a cigarette out before the elevator doors opened. She frantically pushed the "door close" button. Through the glass window to the clinic, she could see Jaysen staring at her from the edge of the station where she had left him. She watched as he looked over to Rhoda, who was still soothing poor Mr. Cox, then back to her. As Jaysen finally moved and started walking to the door she reached and pushed the button for the doors to close harder than she had before.

“C’mon,” she said aloud to herself. He was pulling the clinic door open when the elevator doors finally dinged and started to close. They shut with a soft thud before he could reach her, and the elevator started to move before he could push the button to get it back.

“Thank you,” she said to the metal walls of the elevator.

She had the butt of the cigarette in her mouth before exiting the employee exit on the emergency room level. The security guard who was slouching in the corner eyed her, and decided against telling her that it was against hospital code to smoke on the premises. She lit it once the doors slid closed behind her and inhaled as she weaved between the cars in the lot to get to the corner adjacent to the hospital, where all the patients would huddle in their cloth robes to smoke. There was no one out as she plopped down on the curb and exhaled the smoke from her first puff. It was then that she noticed how cold it was. Her thin scrubs did nothing against the almost winter Tennessee wind. She pulled her elbows in as she took another drag of her cigarette. She watched people shuffling into the emergency room and wondered what would happen if she just left and never came back. She squinted at the large white building and tried to remember the time that she actually liked this place. Looked forward to being at work.

As she squinted and looked back to the ER, she saw Jaysen coming towards her, her jacket in his hands.

“Shit,” she said out loud as she stubbed out the cigarette, throwing the butt into the street and standing up. She turned and started to walk away, to nowhere in particular. She could hear his shoes crunching on loose gravel as he jogged to catch up to her.

When he was beside her, she gave up the fight. “What?”

He looked at her, his smug smile was gone. “It’s cold.” He handed her the jacket. She shoved her hands through the sleeves and looked at him. She couldn’t bring herself to thank him.

“Anything else?” she asked. She could tell he was waiting for some kind reciprocation. He sighed.

“Nope.” He turned to go and Patricia dug another cigarette out of her pocket. He whipped back around. “Actually, yes. The Vanderbilt hospital employee code states that breaks are to be only 10 minutes off campus. I would hate to have to report you if you aren’t back in time.”

She felt a certain relief at his decision to leave and to stop the onslaught of being amicable, as faux as it was.

“I’ll be back,” she answered, white smoke sneaking out with the words.

“Hospital employees are not supposed to smoke during a shift. It sets an unhealthy example for our patients.”

She raised her eyebrows in response, saying nothing as she flicked the ash onto the sidewalk.

As he walked away, his shoulders slightly hunched, she considered being sorry, to perhaps apologize to him for her behavior. After all, it was unwarranted. She decided against it though as she inhaled the rest of the cigarette, the ash sneaking up to the orange butt. She ground it with the bottom of her shoe and headed back into the building. She smelled her jacket as she went through the doors to the hospital. The wind had done its job and kept the smell off of her clothes.

The doors to her floor dinged and opened and she rolled her eyes as she saw Mary through the windows, a Psychology textbook on her lap. Walter was, of course, still there. His dialysis would last 3 more hours.

She was telling herself that she had dealt with worse and that if it were any consolation he was old and would die soon, as she came through the clinic doors and looked over at the spot

where she had left him and his miserable personality. She was surprised to find in his place was a young girl with long brunette hair and thick, black framed glasses.

As she walked past the nurses' station to put her coat away, she notices Jaysen had Walter's chart information and was filling out his paperwork.

"Rhoda decided it would be better if she switched patients with you. She said you might be more comfortable with her 9 am," Jaysen said flatly as she walked by him. She nodded, but he didn't look up to see it.

Once she was settled and back at the station, Jaysen was at the computer entering information.

"I need the girl's folder," she said to his back, starting to feel more and more unsure about her sternness with him. He pointed over his shoulder to a manila folder. She opened it and read the girl's information as she took her time walking over to her chair.

Alexandra Rachel Wright. 17. Birthday: December 12. Treatment initiated 6 months ago. Treatment to be administered maximum days for maximum allotted time. Patricia was acquainted enough with the girl's history when she had finally reached her chair and found the girl with her face hidden by a book. She braced herself for dealing with a snotty teenager, or a "why me" sob story when she cleared her throat to get the girl's attention. The girl pulled the book down from her face and closed it, placing it on her lap. She smiled at Patricia.

"Good morning, Alexandra, My name is Patricia Wheeler and I will be your Dialysis nurse this morning. Are you familiar with this process?"

"Oh, please call me Alex and I am unfortunately quite familiar with this process." Alex stuck her arm out for her blood pressure to be taken. "First this, then temp, then I sit here for a very long while, and you come back every half hour on the half hour to take my blood pressure

again, and I read about Hemingway's Frederic and Catherine," she lifted her book with the other hand.

Patricia nodded. "That's it. But don't forget I also come by every fifteen minute to ask how you are feeling, too." Patricia wrote down the blood pressure and then took out the ear thermometer and placed a sanitary cap on it.

"Ah yes, that too. I suppose for full disclosure, I should say that I don't actually read half the time, I just keep the book high enough that I can watch everyone in here without getting caught."

Patricia gently placed the thermometer in Alex's ear. "No? *A Farwell to Arms* is not riveting enough for you?"

"Oh no, it is, but I find the drama out here in the real world is much easier to get into than WWI love affairs."

"Ah," the thermometer beeped and Patricia wrote down the temperature.

"98.6?" Alex asked. Patricia could feel the tension from the morning easing as she nodded. Alex stuck out her other arm, the one with the dialysis port. Patricia took in the tender skin around it. Alex winced when the needles were injected.

"It's really not as bad as I make it seem," Alex said, as she noticed Patricia face matching her pained expression. Patricia knew that wasn't true, and the 100th time was just as bad as the first time for patients. She turned the machine on, and the hum of a four hour session started for Alex.

"You're all set," Patricia said with a smile, one that she didn't have to force.

"Don't forget to come back and ask me how I am feeling in 15 minutes," Alex smiled back.

“Oh I won’t. I hope you find the floor entertaining today.”

Alex nodded and placed the book back in front of her face with a small wink in Patricia’s direction. Patricia walked back to the nurses’ station with an odd comfort. There was something about Alex she had not expected.

At the nurses’ station, Rhoda was showing Jaysen how to plug in blood pressures, temperatures, and post-dialysis recommendations into each patient’s electronic chart.

“Now, I usually try to enter this information every time I take a new reading, but some people prefer to do it after the patient leaves or after a shift and either way is really fine—” Rhoda stopped as Patricia came around, sat in one of the rolling chairs, and logged into the free computer. She saw Jaysen turn toward her. In his eyes she saw what she knew she would eventually see from him. Sympathy. Pity. His anger at her washed away by information that Rhoda had offered him about Patricia’s situation. That’s what they called it. Her “situation.”

Never to her face, but she knew enough, had been back long enough to hear it in whispers of new interns who she came across, even if momentarily. She closed her eyes and rubbed her eyebrows as the computer came to life with her log in. As she typed in Alex’s preliminary, pre – dialysis stats, Rhoda came over and gently touched her shoulder.

“I am so sorry about this morning and Mr. Cox, you know older people and their ways,” she then moved her hand and rubbed Patricia’s back, like a mother would for an upset child, “but he is all calmed down now, and I convinced him not to report this morning to anyone, so I just want you not to worry about a thing, alright?” Rhoda rubbed Patricia’s shoulder a bit harder as she cooed the last part to her, consoling a fear that Patricia hadn’t had.

The comfort Patricia had felt was gone, being replaced quickly by a hot rage that was boiling in her gut. She clenched her teeth and stared at her screen, not actually reading anything.

“Thank you,” she was able to manage in a staccato.

“Well, it’s alright I know how stressed you are—”

“Thank you but,” Patricia interrupted, “I do not need your help with Mr. Cox, or with any patient.” She turned and looked at Rhoda.

Rhoda pulled her hand back, as if the heat in Patricia’s gut were tangible. She forced the shock on her face into a smile, a smile that told Patricia that Rhoda was remembering her “situation.”

“You’re right,” Rhoda turned back to Jaysen who was watching Patricia. She gave him a questioning look, daring him to add anything to Rhoda’s attempt to soothe her. Jaysen’s cheeks turned a pink hue as he clicked on a blank box on his computer screen.

“So temperature goes here?” he asked Rhoda, already knowing the answer.

Patricia entered all of Alex’s information and found herself curious as to Alex’s cause for dialysis. For every other patient, the answer “kidney failure” was enough for her to be satisfied and to complete her job, but for some reason, she scrolled down to the “Diagnosis and Prognosis” section of her ever growing medical charts. “Early and prolonged ingestion of toxins due to mental instability and disordered eating.” Patricia read on to prognosis, seeing what she already knew, had known since the moment she transferred into the clinic. “Though the patient exhibits quick recovery, the damage to both kidneys is irreversible. Kidney transplant is recommended for longevity of patient’s livelihood. Until availability on the national donor list is conceivable, patient is to undergo dialysis treatments 4 times weekly for 4 hour durations.”

Patricia scoffed audibly. Donor availability. She knew that the national list contained over 85,000 people waiting for a kidney. Unless Alex knew someone who knew someone, she was just one of thousands who would sit in an uncomfortable chair with bruised veins waiting for

something that may never come. She checked the time. It had been ten minutes since she had set Alex up on her machine. She could forgo waiting another 5 minutes.

“How are you feeling?” she asked Alex in a mock sweet tone. Alex laughed.

“Fine. Thanks. Has it been 15 minutes already?”

“How’s the lieutenant?” Patricia asked, rolling over the nurse stool that was in the dialysis station.

“I don’t actually know. What I do know is that man over there, Mr. Cox, wants to stop treatment and go home, and his granddaughter, Mary, doesn’t think that’s a good idea, to which he insisted he would whip her as soon as that ‘old dumb nurse comes and takes this stupid tube out.” Alex answered.

Patricia let out a loud laugh and quickly covered her mouth. She looked over and saw Mary in a chair next to Walter, speaking in hushed tones. He was shaking his head vigorously at whatever she was saying to him.

“How did you know their names?”

“Just listening. I learn a lot by just sitting and letting the world go. That and he yelled Mary’s name 5 times.”

Patricia smirked and shook her head.

“When I was in first grade, my Sunday school teacher told us to be kind to everyone because he or she could be Jesus in disguise.”

“Oh yeah?” Patricia asked, taken off guard by the sudden change in conversation.

“I don’t think he is Jesus.”

“Me neither,” she took off the pressure cuff and wrote down the numbers. “I don’t think any of us here are.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Alex answered. She smiled at Patricia, which made her uncomfortable. Patricia stood up to go, a bitterness starting to rise in her stomach.

“You don’t believe in any of that stuff, do you?”

Patricia cocked her head to the side “What do you mean?”

Alex closed her book. “You know. Father, Son, Holy Ghost. That doesn’t appeal to you.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” though she knew she would say exactly that. It didn’t appeal to her.

“Don’t worry. I won’t find it offensive if you don’t. I just find the thought of something...bigger, comforting. I mean this,” she lifted the arm with the port and tubes sticking out of it, “can’t be it.”

“What if it is?” Patricia said before realizing it. She was treading on dangerous ground. Speaking to a patient about religion.

“What if it isn’t?”

Patricia sat back down. She knew what she was about to say would be worse for her than her plan to swear at Mr. Cox earlier. “How can you believe in a something that hasn’t done anything for you? A God who finds it fitting for you spend all of your time here, doing this.”

“Yes. But I put myself here. In fact, I shouldn’t even be here in the first place. I should be dead. The diet pills should have killed me. But they didn’t.”

Patricia just sat. She had no rebuttal.

“I’m sure it’s in that folder of yours. All my dirty little secrets in 15-20 pages of almost illegible doctor notes typed up so nurses like you can follow the saga. I had anorexia. I abused my body. I thought, the tinier, the better.” She spoke without embarrassment, and without fear of offending. “So I skipped meals. I spent hours at the campus and I doubled caffeine heavy diet pills. And then I collapsed in the hallway on the way from AP US History to AP Latin.”

“I’m sorry,” is all Patricia could think of saying.

“I’m not sure that I am. It was stupid. I did things I knew there would be consequences for, and I am paying the price. But this is a smaller price to pay than what it could be.”

Patricia shook her head and exhaled. She still couldn’t honestly say that she agreed.

“I thought it was worth sharing, I guess.” She put her book back up to her face, to release Patricia from the tense conversation.

Patricia’s dragged back to the nurses’ station. Her next patient would be arriving within minutes. She tapped her hands on the computer keys as she pulled up stats. How a kid could think such things was beyond her. How Alex could neglect to give into the cruel and unforgiving nature of life.

She didn’t go back and sit with Alex again. She would walk by and take her vitals. Check on her as she was supposed to, but didn’t want to speak to her anymore about life and fairness. She busied herself with other patients, other machines, other, normal pitiful lamentations about organ failure.

Finally, Alex’s time was up. Patricia went over to her. Alex looked pale, tired. Patricia felt badly for Alex, which was something she had failed to do for other patients since starting her rotation in the clinic.

“Alex, your time is up,” Patricia said to her in a hushed tone.

“Already? I was just starting to have fun,” she was slow to blink as a smile crossed her face.

Patricia returned the smile. The burden of their previous conversation had moved to the back of her mind. She unhooked Alex’s arm and she winced again.

“Sorry,” Patricia said, rubbing the skin around the port with a gloved hand.

“No, you’re fine. It’s fine.” Alex pulled her arm in and tried to stand up. Her knees buckled under her and she fell back into the cushioned chair with a soft thud.

“No it’s not. Give yourself a minute before standing up, you know that.” Patricia answered sternly. Alex closed her eyes and nodded putting her palms over her eyes.

“Where is your ride?” Patricia asked, pulling a compress from the medical draw next to the chair, for instances just like this, and put it on Alex’s head.

“I don’t have one. I drove myself.”

“You what?” Patricia had never had a patient, especially a young one, drive herself to an appointment.

“Where are your parents?”

“ Working. I just need a minute. I’ll be fine.”

“I am sorry Alex, but there is no way I can let you drive like this. The hospital could get in a lot of legal trouble if I permitted you to leave the premises in your current condition without some sort of guardian supervision.” Though it was true, the hospital could get in a lot of trouble, it was her personal desire to keep Alex in the chair and safe. She would have let Mr. Cox drive home in a heartbeat. “Is there a number I can call for you, maybe someone beside your parents.”

“No.” Alex answered curtly. “I’ve done it before, I just need to,” she stopped and swallowed, “close my eyes for a few minutes.”

Patricia checked her watch. It was one o’clock. Time for her lunch break. “Look, I have a break coming up. Is there somewhere I can take you?”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Alex answered, her eyes still closed.

“It’s no trouble.” She knew she was just going to smoke three to four cigarettes in her car anyway and maybe eat a few Twizzlers. Patricia was going to dismiss Alex’s objections when Rhoda came over.

“Patty, your next appointment is here. And Jaysen and I are swamped. Jennifer booked three appointments at the same time.” The sweet disposition Rhoda usually aired for the clinic was slowly fading.

Patricia rolled her eyes. “Yeah.” She could hear Alex start to lightly snore. “Just help me get this patient into the Recovery Room first.” When Rhoda didn’t respond she looked over her shoulder to find that Rhoda had gone to attend to another patient. She knew she couldn’t carry Alex to the room alone, so she gave in to the only other option she had, as she spotted Jaysen disinfecting the chair adjacent to Alex’s.

“Jaysen,” she half whispered, half yelled. He looked up at her and an involuntary smile crossed his face before he remembered her story and he replaced it with a solemn look. She waved him over.

“Yeah?” he asked. She shushed him.

“Help me get her to the recovery room.”

He nodded silently. Alex groaned as they lifted her to her feet.

“Just a few more minutes,” she said sleepily.

“It’s okay,” Patricia told her. “We are just moving you to a more comfortable place.”

Alex’s feet dragged under her. Patricia noticed how light she was, could feel her ribs where she was holding her up and felt sorry for her. As she crossed the clinic, she wondered what Alex looked like months ago, when she was diagnosed, when she should have been dead.

The door to recovery was open, so Jaysen and Patricia put her on the bed. Jaysen went to the closet and got a white hospital issue blanket. Alex pulled the pillow closer to her body and turned towards the wall. Jaysen handed the blanket to Patricia who covered Alex. Alex immediately grabbed the cover and pulled it to her chin, her quiet snoring starting again.

“Is that normal?” Jaysen asked pulling the door closed behind them as they left her to sleep.

“Yes. Dizziness. Nausea. Exhaustion. The body never gets used to it. Usually though, someone is here to help the patient to the car, they don’t just get left.” Patricia noticed with the last part of the sentence how upset she was at people she didn’t even know. Alex was going through something that her parents should have been part of, should have stopped before it got this far. “She’ll be fine in an hour or two.”

Her use for Jaysen was over and she was back to being annoyed with him.

“Hey Patricia, I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Patricia stopped in her tracks. “For what?” She stared him down, though she wasn’t sure what she would do if he were bold enough to explain to her that he was sorry for the tragedy she was well aware of, during every moment of every day.

Her reaction startled him. “Nothing,” he answered.

“Good,” was all she said as she left him standing there. The charm of her interaction with Alex now completely worn off.

Patricia stopped in the doorway of the recovery room every hour. She would stand and watch until she could see Alex inhale and then exhale. Every time she would leave the door and head back to the floor to attend to the afternoon patients, she would tell herself that she wasn't going to do it again. That Alex was fine, her reaction to the treatment was normal, and that she should stop wasting her time peering in on her. Then she would find herself at the door, 60 minutes later.

It was four in the afternoon when Alex finally woke up. Patricia had seen her chest rise and fall, and turned to go when she heard Alex's voice bounce off the white wall.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked, turning away from the wall and towards the door.

"Only a minute," she answered, taken aback.

"How many times have you been there only a minute?" Alex smiled.

"Four times. We haven't ever had anyone react quite like that and I didn't want to break hospital protocol by sticking you in here and not checking on you." Patricia was lying, there was no such protocol, and Alex had responded exactly how a patient her age and size would react.

"Oh." Alex answered, her smiling growing larger.

"Especially since you came to your session alone, with absolutely no supervision, which is dangerous," Patricia added.

Alex swung her feet to the floor and sat up "I do it all the time," she answered sternly.

"How much time is 'all the time'?"

"Every time."

“Why?” Patricia knew it was none of her business. Her job stopped and started at the glass door, it had to.

“It’s my responsibility. I couldn’t ask anyone else to bear this with me.” Alex moved her look from Patricia to the floor. She bent as if she needed to adjust her sneakers, tie her shoes.

“That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard.” Patricia’s cheeks started to burn when she realized what she had said.

Alex looked up at her, grimacing. “Am I done here?” She stood quickly and stumbled against the bed, the dizzying effects still lingering.

“You’re done.” Patricia turned and left the door way before Alex could say anything else to her. After all, she was only a patient, no different, no better than any other patient.

She made sure to busy herself cleaning up her designated areas on the floor when Alex left. She did catch herself glancing out the window to the parking lot where Alex was making her way to a new blue Honda civic. She watched as Alex stopped and leaned against the car, covering her eyes with her hand and slid to sit on the gravel.

“Ridiculous,” she mumbled, shaking her head.

“What?” Jaysen asked looking up from a chart as he walked by her.

Patricia said nothing and went back to disinfecting the blue clinic chair. By the time she finished her stations and paperwork, it was five o’clock. Another day over. Not that it mattered.

She was able to wait until her car to light up a cigarette. She cracked the driver’s side window, and let the chill from the outside slip in. The radio was on a five o’clock rush hour show, and the host was talking about what qualities one admires most in a partner. Humor was the number one answer. She shut off the radio and drove home in silence.

When she got to her house, a one story white house with a bright red door and a white picket fence bordering the manicured lawn, she sighed.

The grass had been longer this morning when she left. The hedges untrimmed. Everything was in order now, which meant that James had been by. Her suspicions were confirmed with the letter on the door.

December 2011

She was going crazy. She had only been off for 3 days and she was already feeling the effects of cabin fever. Everything was cleaned, folded, stacked. She had counted and recounted the packs of diapers, wipes, and burp towels. Now she had to do the only thing left to do. Wait. She hated waiting. She was sitting at the kitchen table thrumming her fingers across the table cloth when she heard James' car pull in. She pushed the chair across the kitchen tile with a screech and went to the living room.

As he opened the door, he saw her and laughed.

“What?” she crossed her arms on the top of her stomach.

“You. You are a mess.” He pulled off his coat and put it into the closet, still laughing at her.

“It’s not funny. I am going insane here. I have literally nothing to do.”

“Want to trade?” he asked tapping his satchel as he placed it next to the door.

“God yes.” She plopped onto the couch.

“Well the minute you feel comfortable with computer software, you just let me know, and we can switch.” He sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulder.

“Never,” she answered putting her head on his chest. He stroked her hair. “I just wish she—”

“He,” her husband interjected.

Patricia lifted her head and looked at him. “I just wish it,” she emphasized, “would come on.” She laid her head back on his chest and listened to his heart.

“You are always in a rush, when that baby comes you are going to have zero time for anything, you are going to pray for days like this. If I were you I would be soaking it up.

Watching the *Price is Right* and eating everything in the cabinets.”

“For your information I did both those things today. And *Jerry Springer*. And I was still bored by 2:00.” She felt his chest move with a silent laugh. “Don’t laugh at me. This is serious. Today is the due date. I don’t do well when people are late.” His chest bounced harder with another laugh.

“I know you don’t” he answered. “That’s why after your sixth call to me this afternoon, I did some research,” James moved his hand from Patricia’s head and reached into his pocket, pulling out two folded pieces of white computer paper. “Here.”

She took and noticed it was a bullet pointed list.

“I Googled ‘ways to start labor.’ This is what I gathered.”

Patricia let out a small laugh. “You Googled for me? That’s love.”

James nodded vigorously as Patricia started to read the list.

“Let’s see. Eat spicy food. Did it. Acupuncture. Nope. Castor Oil. Disgusting. Sex.”

Patricia looked at James, who moved his eyebrows suggestively. “You added that,”

James pulled back in mock shock “I did not!”

“Okay well then why is it bold with asterisks around it?”

“Okay I did do that part. But that really was on a ‘What to Expect when Expecting’ website. I just wanted to make sure you noticed.”

“Did you miss the part where I said I ate everything in the house? That doesn’t make me rarin’ to jump in the sack.” She went back to reading the list. “Walking. I could do walking.”

“Oh so you can do walking after eating everything in the house, but not other cardiovascular activities. I see.”

“Shut up,” Patricia said with a smirk as she slapped James on the chest. She pushed herself up on the edge of the couch and looked down at her bare feet. She had to lean to the side to see them.

“Is there any way you could maybe get my shoes and then maybe put them on for me?” she wiggled the toes of her right foot towards him.

He stood, having no trouble getting out of the sitting position, and headed to the bedroom upstairs. “Anything for the mother of my child,” he answered with a sincerity Patricia could hear, even though he intended to be sarcastic.

They only made it a block around the neighborhood when she started to feel cramping. Having seen women come into the hospital swearing labor, just go home an hour later baby-less with Braxton Hicks contractions, she kept her discomfort to herself and walked another block. A block and half further, her cramping returned, lingering longer and sharper. She finally looked over at James. Without her having to say a word, he stopped walking.

“You’re kidding. This actually worked?”

Patricia nodded as she pulled her hands from his and started to massage her stomach.

James wanted to get the car, but she refused.

“We only need to worry when they start coming every 4 to 6 minutes. I think I have the rest of this walk in me.”

“But what if your water breaks all over the street?” he asked her, legitimately concerned.

She laughed as the contraction eased.

“That only happens in movies.”

“I don’t want to risk it,” he went for the keys in his pocket, but she gripped his arm.

“Trust me, I had plenty of time on my hands to get this ‘what to do when you’re in labor’ thing down.”

He took his hand out of his pocket and held her hand, through every step back, some slower than others, to the house. After he made sure she was comfortable on the couch, he ran up the stairs for her bag. She couldn’t help but laugh at the noises from their bedroom.

After a loud bang she heard him swearing.

“Honey, the bag, that night bag, where is it?” he yelled to her down the stairs.

Through a particularly painful contraction she was able to get “under the bed” out. She heard him fly down the stairs.

“Are you okay? Is the baby okay? Let’s forget the hospital bag and just go. I’ll get it later.” He tried to help her off the couch, but she shooed his hand from her.

“I’m fine, the baby’s fine, get the bag.”

He inspected her face to make sure she was okay, before darting back up the stairs. She inhaled heavily. She felt another contraction looming. This was really it. She was having a baby Their baby. She looked down and her stomach and kept telling herself it was fine. She couldn’t think about all of the worst case scenarios she had seen while on rotation. All the last minute adjustments and codes called for stressed labors and unresponsive infants.

James thumped back down the stairs with her black overnight bag in tow. She sat on the edge of the couch, not moving to stand up. She hoped it was the pain of another contraction and not fear that was stopping her. James dropped the bag to the floor and sat down next to her. She could feel the panic rising in her as his hand rubbed her back.

“What if I can’t do this?”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

She looked at him wide eyed. “Just tell me everything will be fine.”

He moved his hand from her bag and placed her hand in his and squeezed it. “Everything is going to be fine.” He stood up and helped her to her feet.

He made sure she was buckled in the car before running back and locking the door to the house. As he turned to take the front porch steps, James couldn’t help but to stop and look at her through the car windows as she adjusted the air conditioning.

She wasn’t looking at him, and all he could think as he walked to the car was “God, love you.” As he locked the doors and buckled his seat belt then looked at her with an anxious smile, she thought the same thing.

“Alright,” she said as he shifted into reverse, “let’s go have this little girl.”

“Boy,” he said looking over his shoulder as he reversed into the culdassack.

“Baby,” she answered with a smile as he shifted into drive and moved his hand from the gear shift to her left leg.

November 2012

The white envelope was taped to the red door, under the knocker that was shaped like a lion's head. James had picked it out because it "made him feel royal." She let the knocker fall with a thud that she knew reverberated through the front hall of the house. The handwriting on the outside of the envelope was James' sloppy cursive "P." Not Pat or Patty or Patricia. Just P. When she turned it over, she saw a yellow post-it note. "I hope this helps you move on." It said in the same handwriting as the "P".

She opened the envelope to precisely folded pages of a legal document. Legal jargon typed out on legal paper with space for signatures at the bottom. Each page held James' signature. The space for Patricia's name was still blank. She had made him sign it first. She folded up the papers and put them back in the envelope and unlocked the door to her house. With a creak the door opened on the empty, dark front hallway. She closed and locked the door without turning on the light. Without aiming for any particular spot, she threw the envelope and her keys on the table near the door and walked into the dark kitchen. The only light came from the fridge when she opened it and pulled out diet cranberry juice. She poured the coffee out of the mug she had used that morning and rinsed it, then filled it with cranberry juice. After putting the juice back in the fridge she opened the medicine cabinet and shook a small tablet from an orange prescription bottle. An antihistamine.

James was allergic to everything, that's why they never got a pet, which was good, since they wouldn't have to decide which of them got it when everything was said and done. His allergies did, however, leave her with a full bottle of prescribed medicine that he hadn't remembered to take with him when he left. One was all it would take. That and 30 minutes and she would be out for the night. She popped the small pill and gulped half of the mug. She drank

the rest and put it in the sink, with the 6 other mugs that were coffee and cranberry stained. She looked above the sink and out the window that looked out over the back yard. The fence was higher and brown. A “privacy fence” James had called it when he had it put in.

This morning leaves had covered the browning grass. Now large black bags sat tied against the Oak tree next to the house, and the grass was visible again. A rake was leaned next to the bags. It was obvious to her that he wanted her to know he was still around.

“Well I don’t want our yard to go into disarray,” he had answered curtly when she told him only a month earlier not to worry about it, that she would take care of it.

“You work so much that I doubt you will have a chance to do it.” He was trying to insult her, but she could tell even as he said it that his resolve was weak. He could never be mean to her, even when she deserved it.

“Then I will hire someone to do it. One way or another I will keep your precious yard pristine.”

He had no response to her. She had said “your” not “our” as he had done.

“That’s a waste of money,” was what he finally came up with as he turned to go to his car. She watched as he got into his car and backed out of the driveway. She couldn’t see him as drove out of the neighborhood, but she knew he had looked in the rearview mirror. He once told her that he always looked in the rearview mirror at her and the house when he left the driveway for work, because he had to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

Looking out the window now, she knew he was right. She did work too much to make time to do it. Well, she had purposefully not made time to do it. She hated the house. Her eyelids started to feel heavy before she could feel the anxiety of being alone. That was the nightly race she ran. To be asleep before she could be alone. Or afraid. Or Angry. Or Broken.

She grabbed the envelope off of the table and yawned as she went up the stairs. This was the third night in a row that she had used the medicine. Before it was over the counter sleep aids. Before that wine or vodka. Before that no sleep at all. She hoped, as she pushed the door to her bedroom open and kicked pushed her shoes off, that they would stay as strong as they felt now, that she would be woozy every night at 7 and sleep until 5 or 6 in the morning. Getting rid of 11 or so hours of thoughts or replays of real life tragedy over and over again.

She pulled off her scrubs and threw them into a pile of other dirty laundry. She placed the envelope on the night stand and pulled on night pants and an oversized hoodie from her Alma Mater, Vanderbilt University.

After getting ready for bed and performing her nightly routine of covering her windows with blankets to block out the setting sun, she crawled into bed, turned the light on next to the bed and opened the envelope to look back at the legal papers.

She read the words “Reasoning for the divorce” and thought that once you read it enough, the word divorce looked funny. Strange. Unintelligible. Under those words and their accompanying colon there were the words “Irreconcilable Differences.” An umbrella term that would fit their “predicament,” as her attorney had told her.

There was another one of those terms. For Jaysen and the rest of the hospital staff she had a “situation” that everyone was sorry for. She was dealing with a “predicament” with James in the courtroom. She wouldn’t actually see the inside of a courtroom though, James would see to that. As much as he hated conceding to her, to the absurdity of a divorce, he would make it as painless as possible for her, even if it was killing him to do it.

Flipping through the pages, she came to the realization that there were only 2 things left for her to do. Sign and bring them her attorney, who would take care of the rest. It would be over.

“Too bad I don’t have a pen,” she thought as she put the papers back on the night stand. She was feeling the full effects of the pill, so she turned off the light and adjusted her pillows.

“Dammit,” she said as she realized that she didn’t have her phone. She pushed back her blankets and went to her pile of scrubs to fish the phone out of the back pocket. She ignored the missed call and the voicemail and three text messages that she had. She scrolled to the alarm and set it for 5:30 the next morning. She placed it on the nightstand as it started to vibrate. The screen lit up with Emily’s name and her picture.

She had been a constant presence since August, even though Patricia never wanted her to be. When she called, she always left a voicemail, that Patricia would neglect to listen to until her mailbox was full. Then she would pick one, usually the most recent one, listen to half of it and then delete all of them. She didn’t feel bad about deleting each of them. They all said the same thing. That Emily was sorry. That she was here if Patricia needed her or needed anything, if she wanted to talk.

“I’m only a phone call away Pat, you know that,” is how she would end each message. She used to stop by before her graveyard shifts. She would knock, Patricia would look out the bedroom window and see her at the door. She wouldn’t move from her spot and Emily would leave whatever she had brought, casseroles, sympathy cards from the ER staff, cans of soup, flowers, on the porch and leave. When she was gone, Patricia would go down and gather what had been left. If it wasn’t food, it went in the trash. If it was, she would eat what she wanted, then trash it, pretty glass dish and all.

After a month of coming by, she stopped. Patricia had hoped she had gotten the hint, but when the coming around stopped, the calls started. She tapped the ignore button and the phone quieted. The phone buzzed a minute later, letting her know that she had yet another voicemail. She crawled back into the bed and turned towards the windows. Light was still coming through the corners of the glass panes that the blankets and blinds hadn't covered. The beams made it easy for her to make out James' side of the bed. His half of the comforter still perfect, his pillows in place. Even when she was in deep sleep she never seemed to roll over onto his side. She placed her palm on the pillow and slid it back and forth, the top of the case fabric cool. She huffed as she turned again, her back to his side of the bed and she drifted off to sleep, knowing there was a pen in the drawer of the nightstand.

Patricia tapped her lips with her index finger. She knew that what she was doing was against policy, both the hospital's and her's. On the screen in front of her, was Alex's personal information. Her address, her phone number. By her estimation, Alex only had to drive roughly 15 minutes to get home last night. Patricia had looked out the window into the patient lot when she got to work that morning. The Honda was gone, which meant Alex must have finally gotten in and driven home yesterday. She had been able to quell the guilt she felt when she walked in that morning with her tasks. But it was noon now and all of her patients were set up and she had a free minute, which invited that small gnawing guilt back to her. She opened a candy bar that she had gotten from the floor vending machine, a bar that was serving as her lunch for the day.

"You know that's not healthy, right?" Jaysen came around the corner of the counter bag carrying a brown and sat in an unoccupied chair.

"You have a very annoying habit of speaking to people when they don't want to be spoken to. I know they are." Patricia bit into the bar with resolve. He opened the bag and pulled out a yogurt and a spoon.

"I'm just looking out for you." He pulled the lid off the lid and licked it, undeterred by her callous response.

"How long is your rotation on this floor?" Patricia turned back to the computer screen and pulled up the report of the current patient in Chair #3. Jaysen had won the staring contest, and she didn't want him to be able to see that Alex's report was pulled up. He would no doubt ask questions.

"Oh. No rotation. I am here for the long haul." His yogurt made an obnoxious sucking noise as he stirred it.

Patricia went back to Alex's screen, jotted her number down on a post it note, closed both the open patient screens and took another bite of her candy bar. She wasn't sure which was worse Jaysen's pity or Jaysen's desire to be nice to her.

"I'll be back in fifteen," she said as she got up from her chair, shoving the post it note in her pocket and headed towards the door. She had some time left in her break and she didn't want to spend in anywhere near Jaysen.

"What about your patients?" he said after her.

"They'll live," she said over her shoulder. "Maybe," she added, saying it to herself, though Jennifer heard her and shook her head subtly.

When she finally got out to the parking lot, she took a left into an outside waiting area that the hospital added a few years earlier. It was a large garden with stone benches, statues, and marble plaques, engraved with sayings that are supposed to bring hope and peace of mind. She shook her head as she crossed into it and sat at one of the empty benches. She could see her reflection in the glass window panes. On the other side of those panes was the ER. She remembered looking out those windows to seeing James in this garden his head in his hands, elbows on his knees.

"Dammit," she said under her breath as she stood and turned the opposite direction, facing the brick of the building instead. She pulled the post it out of her pocket, and then her cell phone. She dialed quickly and hit send. Her need to focus on anything else but the image of James squashed the apprehension she had about making the call.

It rang four times, and Patricia had decided to hang up when she heard a click.

"Hello?" A woman answered.

Patricia cleared her throat. “Good Afternoon. This is Patricia Wheeler from the Dialysis Unit at Vanderbilt University’s Medical Center.”

“Yes?” Though it was only a word, Patricia could tell the line on the other end was growing impatient with the call.

“Is this the Wright residence?”

“It is.”

“I was looking to speak to a Mr. or Mrs. Wright as a follow up to Alex’s dialysis visit yesterday.”

“Mr. Wright no longer resides here, but I am *Ms.* Wright. So you can speak to me about *Alexandra’s* visit.”

Patricia’s stomach clinched and she rolled her eyes.

“Well I just wanted to make sure she got home safely and she was feeling alright. Some of our patients have some pretty severe reactions to the treatment.”

“Oh I see. She seemed fine when I got in yesterday,” her voice was calm, business like, as if the call were about a deal rather than a daughter.

Patricia waited for more, but the voice on the other end had decidedly finished the conversation.

“Is that all?” the voice asked after a few seconds of silence.

Patricia wanted to tell her that it was not all. That Alexandra preferred to be called Alex and that no teenager should ever be put through what she was going through alone.

“That’s it. Sorry for disturbing your afternoon.”

“It’s fine. Thank you for your concern.” The phone clicked. Patricia swore under her breath as she shoved the phone into her pocket. A perfect example for why she shouldn’t go out

of her way to be nice. She started out of the garden area and toward the hospital entrance, when she stopped abruptly. Coming off of her ER shift was Emily.

December 2011

“Breathe, Sweetheart, you are doing great,” James said softly as he walked Patricia into the ER.

“That is so cliché,” Patricia huffed as they approached the desk. From the desk a beaming older woman looked Patricia up and down.

“Oh how wonderful,” she said as she picked up the phone and paged someone. Within seconds, Emily was coming out of two white swinging ER doors with a wheel chair.

“Our balloon finally popped, huh?” she said pulled the chair up behind Patricia’s ankles and easing her back.

“It better have, if this is Braxton Hicks I am going to punch someone. Everyone.”

Emily laughed as she guided the chair through the doors to an unoccupied space behind blue curtains. She took Patricia’s vitals and called her doctor. When he confirmed that she was, in fact, in labor, he had Patricia brought to the labor and delivery floor.

Though Emily was still on call in the ER, she came up to check on Patricia every break she got. When she came into the private suite Patricia had been occupying for roughly 7 hours and sat down, her shift was over.

“I swear this kid is preparing a big musical number, with the amount of time it is taking to get its ass out here.” Emily said, shedding her hospital badge and tucking it into her purse. Patricia was preparing for another contraction so she mustered a small smile and nodded.

James was holding her right hand, she reached her left hand out to Emily. Emily huffed, but smiled and came to the other side of the bed to hold her hand through it. She held Patricia’s hand for the next 30 minutes until it was finally time to deliver. When the doctor came in with

floor nurses and started to prep her for the delivery, Emily was ready to head home. She had been at the hospital for 14 hours, but Patricia had a request.

“Stay, please.”

Emily looked at the doctor, who just shrugged.

“If I ever find it in me to have one of these, you better be here,” Emily answered tightening her grip on Patricia’s hand.

November 2012

“Hi,” Emily was just a few feet from her and was standing between Patricia and the hospital door.

“Hi.” Patricia returned. “I’m sorry I haven’t called you back. I’ve been busy lately”

“It’s fine. I understand,” Emily said.

“Just with the new floor assignment and stuff it’s been crazy.”

“No, I know,” Emily smiled, and Patricia felt it. What she had been avoiding for the past 3 months. Sympathy.

“I actually have to get there now, so. Good running into you,” Patricia went to move around her.

“Patricia I’m pregnant.” Emily blurted out. The doors to the hospital never seemed so far away.

“Congratulations,” she answered and willed herself to move forward.

“I just didn’t want you to hear it through someone else, and it’s not something I did on purpose, I—” Emily was talking to empty air, though Patricia had caught enough of it before getting through the doors to feel heavy and tired.

The rest of her day went by in a fog. Emily’s words bouncing off the walls of her head, twisting her insides. She had to force focus on the simplest of tasks, to finish paper work and have any semblance of courtesy towards her patients.

Even Jaysen’s constant annoying presence wasn’t enough to shake her out of her daze. Though she was sure he asked her if she was alright, if she needed to go home at least a dozen times, she never actually heard him. She just heard “pregnant.”

When the day finally ended, all she could think about was doubling her dosage of the prescription allergy medicine. The sooner she could end this day, the better.

December 2012

“Can I get you anything? This is the last of the rounds before the descent.” The air stewardess with perfect red lipstick smiled at Patricia.

“Soda water, please.” Patricia handed the girl an empty plastic cup to refill. Instead, the stewardess took it and dumped it into a black plastic trash bag she had on her cart.

“Alcohol is also complimentary in first class.” The stewardess said as she poured ice into a new plastic cup. She filled it up halfway with soda water and then looked at Patricia.

“Vodka.”

The stewardess gave her a smile, as if they were sharing some secret. She opened a small bottle and filled the rest of the cup halfway. After placing the cup on Patricia’s tray, she leaned over and discreetly put 2 small bottles on the tray.

“We aren’t supposed to hand these out directly, but you look like you could use them.” She winked and pushed her cart on to the next set of plush airplane seats.

Patricia wasn’t surprised that she “looked like she could use it.” In fact, if the stewardess had offered her a controlled substance, she would have accepted without batting an eyelash. After all, she had never known herself to leave Vermont refreshed and ready to take on the world. This “vacation” was no different. She swallowed half of the unmixed drink, and her throat burned. She looked at the two small bottles. She let out a huff as she swept the two bottles into her purse.

She thought back to the last 2 weeks she had spent at home at her parent’s house, in her old room. She had wanted to stay in a hotel, for just a weekend, but her parents insisted that she stay at home.

“We never get the chance to see you, sweetie, that’s all.” That’s what her mother had said to her when she called and told them she was thinking about coming home.

Patricia still wasn’t sure why she said yes to staying with them. It’s not like they had made any effort to see her outside of their four walls or their little town. The only time they ever came to Tennessee to see her was for her wedding. No other celebrations, or tragedies, could bring them back. But they were family, and she knew that neither of them would surprise her with being pregnant.

When she arrived, her mother hugged her tightly and then pulled her away to examine her.

“Oh sweetheart,” was all her mother could say. Patricia blinked a few times in case there was a possibility of tears, but then she realized that she was in the middle of an airport and that there were real families being reunited, some shedding tears of joy, and she shouldn’t waste hers thinking about a moment so sad. Her mother hugged her again and let her go.

In the car, Patricia just followed the familiar roads with her eyes. Her mother had the radio tuned to NPR. The volume was low, so only the murmur of male voices was heard in the car.

“Your father has a whole list of things he wants to do with you, and people he wants you to see, since it’s been so long.”

Patricia nodded, not looking from the window and the piles of dirty snow on the side of the road. When they finally pulled into the driveway, Patricia took in the bare trees, skeletons of their former selves. Her father was standing on the stoop, watching her mother park. Though it was through the windshield and the thick cold air, she saw that look on his face, his version of the “Oh sweetheart” look. The look he gave when he felt helpless, a look she hadn’t seen since

she had fallen off her bike at 5, or when her high school boyfriend moved away for college and broke up with her. She wondered if anyone would ever actually really see *her* again as she opened her door and headed to the trunk to get her bags. She stooped to grab her black duffel and her carry on.

“I got it,” he fathers voice was next to her.

“It’s okay.” In an effort to dispel any further pity, she rushed to pick up all her luggage, knocking her head on the hitch on the trunk.

“Son of a Bitch,” came out as she winced. He father smiled with the side of his mouth.

“Sorry.”

Her father shook his head and he took the handles of her bags from her. She followed him up the drive way and into the house, where her mother was already brewing coffee. Her mother always thought coffee was not only appropriate, but necessary for any occasion, good or bad. Only coffee, not cocoa or tea or cider. Patricia smiled briefly as she remembered winter nights that she couldn’t sleep because she was offered coffee as a kid and not hot chocolate. Her father took her bags through the living room and up the stairs to her bedroom, leaving Patricia alone in the room. Patricia took it in, knowing every inch of the room, feeling like this was not her home, even though it had only been 8 years since she had packed up and moved to Tennessee to attend Vanderbilt.

She finished her inspection of the room when her eyes landed on the fireplace mantle. The mantle had always been for family photos, following a progression of Patricia’s life, from kindergarten to soccer to homecoming, high school graduation to college graduation. Patricia went to the fireplace and walked along the mantle, following the timeline of her life with each step she took, tracing the frames with her fingertip. When she had gone from one end to the

other, she found an empty space after her wedding picture. A place where a frame had been and wasn't anymore. She heard the stairs creak which meant her moment alone was over.

“Dad, what photo went here?”

She knew which picture was missing, though she had never seen it framed. It was a Polaroid picture that Emily had taken in December a year ago. Patricia was red and sweaty, sitting up in a hospital bed, her hair thrown up in a messy bun. Lying beside her was James. They both looked exhausted, but they were both smiling. Their arms tucked under a pink blanket. Peeking out was a tiny pink nose. She had sent it to her parents two days after the picture was taken, when Patricia was released from the hospital, with a baby, the beginnings of a family in tow.

Patricia bit her inner cheek. For a moment she imagined herself pushing each and every one of those photos off the mantle with a thrust of her forearm. She should just go ahead and negate all of her memories, since her parents decided to hide her most important one. Instead she just nodded at him in defeat.

“Coffee is ready,” her mother called from the kitchen, with that, her father's poker face was back. He gently turned Patricia away from the mantle and to the kitchen. She plopped into a kitchen chair and her mother brought her coffee in a Vanderbilt mug.

“Three Creamers, a Splenda and an Equal, right?”

Patricia nodded as she took the cup and stirred the spoon that was still in the coffee. Her mother then placed a piece of pumpkin roll in front of her. Patricia looked at the roll and then up at her mother, who was beaming.

“Your favorite, remember?”

“My favorite.” She took the spoon from the coffee and cut a piece of the roll. As she chewed, she felt like her taste buds had dulled. To her, it was paste in her mouth. It was the same with the coffee. She slumped her back against the kitchen chair as she realized no matter how far she went, she would always feel the misery. It would always find her, after every connecting flight and state line she crossed.

“Where’s the picture?” She asked after she had forced herself to swallow.

“What picture?” her mother asked her, eyeing her father.

“My family picture.”

Her father cleared his throat as her mother stood in silence.

“Well?” Patricia asked, as they stayed motionless, wordless.

“We put it away. We thought—” her mother started.

“I would like it. Please” She was struggling with keeping her tone even and respectful, but she felt a bubbling under her omnipresent misery.

“Give her the photo, Miriam” her father said, lowering himself into a seat next to her. Miriam stood her ground for another moment.

“Please” Patricia asked again. Her conviction stronger. Her mother finally moved to one of the kitchen drawers and pulled out a medium sized silver frame. She started towards the table.

“Just put it back on the mantle” Patricia shielded her eyes from the contents of the frame. Her mother looked at her father again and he nodded. Patricia listened as her mother left the room and placed the frame back over the fireplace. When her mother came back into the kitchen, she sat in the other chair next to Patricia. Patricia picked at the cream cheese in the pumpkin roll. Her mother sighed.

“So. Tomorrow we were thinking about heading to your Aunt’s. She wants to have a little welcome home get together for you. Nothing big, just family and her famous spinach artichoke dip.” Her mother elbowed Patricia. Patricia forced a smile.

“Sounds good.”

“And maybe a trip to Yankee Candle at some point? I know how you love the Christmas room, and since tomorrow is December 1st, it will be perfect.”

Patricia’s heart skipped. Not from joy, but from the fact that they were officially entering the month she dreaded.

“Right.”

“Maybe grab you some winter scented candles, bring Vermont back to Tennessee when you go.” Her father smiled at her. He rubbed her other shoulder. She offered another nod. It was silent as she looked out the kitchen window to the back yard, which offered more dead trees and dry brown grass. Her father’s fire pit was covered in snow, as were the logs lined up next to it. She always hated the winters in Vermont. This one was no different, just harder.

“I think I am going to go upstairs for a while, if that’s alright, we can catch up later?”

“Of course, sweetheart, we can go grab dinner at Vinny’s and you can tell us all about what it’s like down south, alright?” her mother offered.

She pushed her chair away from the table and her now lukewarm coffee. She went through the living room, not looking at the mantle, but catching the silver frame in her peripheral. As she took her time up the stairs she heard her mother and father speaking in whispers. Instead of continuing the last 6 steps up, she sat on the step she was on, like she did when she was little and was trying to spy on her parents.

“I told you that you should have left that picture up, Miriam.”

“I didn’t think she’d noticed. My God, Henry, she hasn’t been home for like 10 years, how was I supposed to know that would be the first thing she looked at. I hope she isn’t up there bawling her eyes out. She seems so sad.”

“She wouldn’t cry. She never cries. She has her own kind of sad.”

Patricia didn’t want to hear anymore. She knew that they would talk about her, that she would be the subject of family discussion, she just hoped that everyone had gotten it out of their systems within the 12 months that it happened. She stood up and took the half dozen stairs two at a time until she was at the top of the stairs. When she got to the last room on the right, her room, she pushed the door open, closed it behind her and took the three steps necessary to collapse onto the bed. She crawled up to the pillows and thought about opening the blinds to the outside. She was tired enough not to make the effort. Besides, all that was waiting for her outside was bleakness. At least in Tennessee winter was a tentative term. She heard the door creak and she sighed. Then she felt a weight on the corner of the bed.

“This isn’t one of those ‘plenty of fish in the sea’ speech times,” she said, still facing the window. “Those really didn’t help all that much when I was 16, and they sure as hell won’t work right now.”

“I know.” Her father said.

“About which part?”

“Both. I knew it was bullshit every time I told you that. Or that tomorrow was a new day.”

“Then why did you say it?” She turned herself toward him.

“Because I am your dad, which means I am not supposed to tell you your boyfriend is an idiot. Or that life isn’t fair and you will never really get what you want.”

“I wish you had.”

“Oh please, Pat. You already knew it. You just indulged me with a ‘thanks dad’ and a hug.”

“So let’s start right now then.” She sat up and crossed her legs. “Tell me that bad things happen to good people. And good things happen to bad people.”

Her father shrugged. Helpless. “They do. And good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people.”

“Okay so which one am I? The good person who God fucked over, or the bad person who got exactly what she deserved?”

Patricia’s father tensed at her language.

“The good.” Her father’s jaw clenched. “You’re an adult, so I am going to be frank here. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to fix this. Fix you.”

“I don’t need *fixing*. I need to know why. Like maybe why you and mom didn’t come to the funeral? I stood there and watched them lower that tiny casket into the ground without the two people who were supposed to be there for me. I put dirt in a grave that shouldn’t have existed, and I did it alone.” She choked on the last word and her father leaned in to hug her. With all the force she could muster she pushed back against his shoulders so he nearly fell to the floor. Shock flashed across her father’s face, but within a blink he regained his composure. Patricia took a deep breath and pushed hair out of her face. Her father narrowed his eyes at her, examining her.

“I don’t think I have ever seen you cry, you know that? Not really cry anyway. Even when you were little. You would howl when you fell off your bike, or broke your arm, but I never saw a real, cathartic cry from you.”

“So?” Patricia tugged hard at her long sleeved shirt, pulling her hands into it.

“That doesn’t strike you as a little weird? Never crying?”

Patricia crossed her arms across her chest tightly. “What’s the point? It won’t change anything. My tears won’t make everything in life right again, why waste it.”

Her father just shook his head at her. “We will head for Vinny’s in an hour or so if you want to rest.” He got off the bed and went to her door. As he opened it, Patricia asked again.

“Why didn’t you come?” But all she got as a response was the sound of the door clicking shut. She waited until she heard the thud of his feet down the stairs before she laid down again. Turning toward the window, she pulled one of the pillows out from behind her head covered her face with it. She let out one large shrill scream into the pillow stuffing.

“Are there a lot of country singers where you live? I heard that’s where everyone moves when they want to big in music.”

This was the sixth time since the beginning of the party that Patricia had been asked about country music. This particular time it was her 21 year old cousin Angela asking her.

“Some, yeah.” Patricia was on her second cup of Vodka infused lemonade, so the redundancy of mundane conversation was no longer trying every one of her nerves.

“Have you ever seen one? Like Keith Urban?”

“In the grocery store once.” She downed the rest of the cup.

“Really?” her cousin’s eyes widened.

“Nope.” Patricia smiled insincerely, hoping her sarcasm could pass for a joke. She moved from the corner of the kitchen where she was standing to the punch bowl that was already down to being only half full. She poured herself another full cup and caught her mother watching her. Patricia lifted her cup in her mother’s direction and took a gulp.

Her cousin was waiting expectantly when she returned.

“I thought about moving south, it’s so much milder down there. And there are plenty of colleges. I figure if you did it, I could do it too, right?”

“Right.”

“Mommyyyyyyy!!!” From behind Patricia came a small girl with brown pig tails. She ran full force into the legs of Patricia’s cousin.

“Careful now, Angel,” her mother looked down and offered her daughter a smile.

“Uncle Jake won’t let me have another cookie, he said last time he gave me one I had a shit attack.”

Angela's eyes grew wide as she looked from her daughter up to Patricia. Patricia choked on her lemonade and moved her hand in front of her mouth to hide a laugh.

"Where did you hear that word?"

"Uncle Jake just said it."

"Jesus Christ" Angela said under her breath. "Uncle Jake?" Angela called out as she moved from the corner of the kitchen towards the living room, leaving her daughter and Patricia alone. Patricia took a long sip of her drink. The little girl just looked up at her. Patricia stared down at her.

"Hello," the little girl finally said.

"Hello," Patricia returned.

"Who are you?" The little girl said as she stuck an end of one of her pigtails into her mouth.

"Pat" she took another sip. Her cup half empty. She was starting to feel a pre-buzz warmth. "Who are you?"

"Annie."

"Nice to meet you Annie."

Annie just stared at her, chewing on her hair.

"What are you doing here?" Annie finally spit out her hair to ask.

Patricia wanted to tell her the truth, which was she didn't know, that she didn't want to be here.

"This party is for me. I live far away and I'm visiting."

"How far?"

"Really far. Hours and hours."

“How come you get a party?”

Because I have nothing left to live for but I am too chicken shit of consequences to stop doing that, so I exist just to exist and this party is supposed to change all of that.

“Because I haven’t been home in a very long time.” Patricia sat in a kitchen chair.

“I only get parties on my birthday”

“When is your birthday?”

“December 17” Annie stated, matter of factly. Patricia took another sip, realizing how close December 15th was. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

“Are you asleep?” Annie asked from the blackness beyond Patricia’s lids.

“No.”

“Then why are your eyes closed?”

“Just thinking,” Patricia opened her eyes back and focused on Annie. “How old will you be on your birthday?”

“Four.” Annie held up 4 small, chubby fingers.

“Good age,” Patricia said as she finished her drink.

“What’s that?” Annie asked pointing to the cup.

“Big girl lemonade.” Patricia wanted another cup, but the floor was too far from the bowl for her to get up.

“I’m a big girl. Can I have some big girl lemonade?”

Patricia smiled. “You have to be at least 4 for this big girl lemonade.”

Annie crossed her arms and pouted. “No cookies, no lemonade. This stinks.” Annie got up and left the kitchen.

“Amen.” Patricia said looking at the bottom of her empty glass.

On the ride home, Patricia kept her eyes closed. If she was counting correctly, within the 6 hours she spent with her family, she drank a dozen drinks. She had one water the entire time. The last hour was a blur. She couldn't remember who she had talked to, or what she had said. She just remembered a lot of hugs from people that never offered her hugs, and people rubbing her back. She felt sick. Sick from the drinks. Sick from the day. When her father finally parked the car, she opened the door and threw up.

"Aw, Patricia." Her mother stepped back in disgust. And for a moment, Patricia felt guilty.

"Sorry." She coughed, regretting not splashing some of the lemonade bile onto her mother's boots.

"I just don't understand Henry," her mother whispered to her father as she helped Patricia out of the car, "it's been 6 months. Shouldn't something have changed by now?"

"Don't" Henry replied, taking Patricia's other arm and helping her up the porch step.

"I'm fine," Patricia stated, shaking off her parents. Her father unlocked the door and Patricia stumbled through the living room and up the stairs, refusing assistance. On the last step she tripped and fell forward, her cheek landing on the hardwood floor.

"Shit," she heard her father after her. He helped her to her feet and she let him walk her to her room. "I'll get you some ice."

"I don't want ice," Patricia answered kicking off her boots, her father was already out the door and down the stairs. By the time he returned she was in lounge pants and a t-shirt. She crossed her arms when she saw he had returned with a bag of ice cubes.

He sat down next to her and offered the bag. She didn't move to take it, so he placed it on her cheek. She winced. They sat in silence. Patricia looked beyond her father, to her board full of push-pinned pictures and certificates from high school.

"It hasn't been half a year. I know because I count every dragging day." Patricia took the ice and held it on her cheek. "I count up one way, and down another, and I don't know which way is worse or harder." She looked at her father, who looked back, puzzled.

"Down?"

"To her birthday. I forgot she was born 2 days before Annie's birthday."

"15 days down then." Her father said.

"15 days down," she repeated.

"You could stay you know."

Patricia scoffed. "I can barely make it through a party. I don't think I can make it another 15 days here."

"I don't mean 15 days, Pat. I mean for good. Come home." His voice was soft, and as Patricia looked at him, she saw the man she needed 4 months ago, the man she knew when she was 18. "The hospital is always looking for nurses, you can stay here until you get set up."

"No."

Her father opened his mouth to retort, but when he saw the drunken resolution on her face, he closed it and just nodded, capitulating.

"I'll let you get some sleep." He left without another word. Patricia sat for a moment. She opened the bag and pulled out a piece of ice. She stuck it in her mouth and bit down and chunks hit her teeth. She was realizing just how bad tomorrow was going to be for her.

She was right about the next day. When she sat up in her bed, her head started pounding. It didn't stop after a cup of coffee or two aspirin and 3 glasses of water. She felt fuzzy and unfocused. It wasn't until she ate breakfast that things started to settle and she was able to catch the conversation she was apparently apart of at her kitchen table.

"Will you at least consider it?" was the first thing she really heard.

"What?" she asked, her mother looking hopeful. Perhaps she had said yes to something in the hung over blur.

"To moving home."

"I have a home. In Tennessee." Patricia picked up a piece of bacon from the spread and ate it.

Her mother looked at her father who just offered a shrug. He could see it in her eyes the previous night. Her heart wasn't in Vermont. The heart she had, though she could do nothing about it, was unmoving thousands of miles away.

"It just breaks my heart, seeing you like this. Empty. I think you would feel better here, with your family." Her mother offered, as she used her napkin to dab her eyes. Patricia put the piece of bacon she was eating back onto her plate. She was no longer hungry.

"I had a family. And you haven't seen me empty. You would have known what that looks like if you really wanted to. But you didn't." She pushed her chair out. "I'm going to get ready for our fun filled family trip to Yankee Candle." There was no question, after 2 weeks at her parent's house, she would be going home. The silence of an empty house had to be better than the constant reminders unconsciously served to her by family members.

The baggage claim was nearly empty. Patricia was glad for it, she hated the awkward move to grab bags off of a moving conveyer. When her carry-on finally came through, she pulled hard and fast and almost fell back with its weight. It was much lighter before. But that was before her mother bought her a case of Yankee candles, before Patricia purchased a gift for the next day. She unzipped the bag to make sure nothing was broken and found everything was still intact.

As she re-zipped the bag and threw the strap over her shoulder to haul to the car, she thought about how ironic it would have been to break something that was going to be a gift to something that was already broken. She walked toward the shuttle spaces to wait for a bus to take her to the parking lot. She passed underneath the constantly changing and updating arrivals and departures. In the corner was the time and date. December 14th, 9:08 PM. She calculated how much time she had before one of the longest, loneliest days of her life. Not even three hours. She had already arranged a shift in dialysis and a coverage shift in recovery for tomorrow night. She just had to stay busy for 24 hours. She had done it her whole career as a student nurse, as a pregnant ER nurse, she could do it on December 15th.

When a shuttle finally came to get her it was 9:25 PM. She decided to text her parents and let them know she was home. On the lock screen was an indication for a missed call. She swiped and saw that James had called. There was no voicemail. She cleared the call log and texted her parents.

“Okay, Pat. Love you. You are always welcome to come home. Real home.” Her father wrote back. She shook her head to herself and locked her phone. Once at the car she tossed her bags into the trunk and started the car, revving the engine in hopes of getting the heat started. She

turned on defrost and sat waiting for the thin layer of ice to melt away. Tennessee must have had a few rough days.

As she waited, she thought about the last thing her father had said in the terminal in Vermont. He was hugging her and her mother was too busy trying to “hold it together” to hear him.

“Your mother wanted to come say good bye. To her. To Josephine. I didn’t”

Patricia pulled away and looked at him with a mix of shock and pain.

“Why?” she whispered

“I couldn’t do it. To watch you die too, I couldn’t.” He coughed in hopes of stopping himself from crying. Patricia could see it in his eyes, though. A thin layer of water, as he tried to blink it back. She knew he was telling the truth. He wasn’t excusing himself, he wasn’t offering her pity. He meant it. She let him put his arms around her and hug her again. Over the intercom they called her flight and he released her.

“I love you, sweetheart.” He said unable to blink it back any longer.

“I love you too.” She turned quickly and hugged her mother, not wanting to look back at him.

It was 10:01 PM when she finally shifted the car into drive and slung the ice from her windshield with her wipers. The phone buzzed in the passenger seat next to her, she was missing another call from the only other person who was about to enter the longest and loneliest day of his life.

Patricia opened the door to her car, but the winter wind whipped it back and onto the shin of her left knee.

“Mother Fuc—”

She stopped herself from finishing the word. Even though no one could hear her, she didn't know how the spirits would respond to her swearing in the final resting place of their physical vessels. She leaned over and took the stone cherub off the carpet on the floor of her passenger seat. Sturdy. Capable of handling the weather in Nashville without bowing to it and breaking.

She kicked the door back open with her booted foot, extending her leg to hold it in place. She could feel the bruise already starting. With her free hand she grabbed the pink roses and shimmied out of the car. She pressed the lock button on the keys and closed the door swiftly with her right leg. Hands full and heart heavy she trod down the path in the cemetery to lot 14G, the plot she owned.

The path she followed was worn by others who came to pay respects to soulless skeletons in graves she did not know. Maybe a grandmother in 7G or a father one row over. Bringing tokens that matter only to the people who place them at the head of the grave, next to granite stone. The cherub felt heavier than she knew it was, getting cold quickly and numbing her naked palm. She knew she should invest in gloves. She heard a crow caw in a tree above 10G. Making fun of her no doubt. Other than him and his twisted laughter, it was silent. And dark. She felt for a moment like the dirt covering those who were gone was settling above her too, she the one actually in limbo.

She was well on her way to blaming the heavy depression that was collapsing her lungs on seasonal affective disorder when she arrived at 14G, a plot she knew all too well, and found she was not alone. A man in a black pea coat was hunched over the headstone. She could only see his back and his thick brown hair, but she already knew who it was, their estrangement fresh. Her pulse quickened and her face burned.

“James?”

He turned startled and took her in. His hands were dusted with dirt. She noticed a small wad of weeds being gathered at the headstone.

“I just wanted to clean it up a bit.”

He had never visited Josephine’s grave, to her knowledge. No one had. But her. Weekly. He stood up and clapped his hands together to remove the rest of the dirt.

“What is that?” He pointed to the statue in her arms.

“It’s for her.” She stepped forward and places the statue at the head of the tiny grave. It was outlined with bricks. Three feet long. Three feet wide. Six feet deep. The both looked at it in silence.

That was what they knew, since she died. Patricia had tried to find the words, struggled sleepless nights to think of a way to communicate with the person she, at one time in her life, seemed to always have something to say to.

The wind swept through the dead leaves in the trees, rolling browns leaves across the dead grass. Patricia pulled her coat collar and shuddered.

“You should get gloves,” James said looking to her then back to the cherub.

“It’s not always this cold,” she retorted.

James took a step forward and wiped the engraving of her name. His thumb graceful as it swept dirt out of the “Marie” in “Josephine Marie Wheeler,” as gentle as if hit was her small cheek he was wiping.

“Happy Birthday,” he spoke softly, but the wind carried the words to Patricia’s ear and they bounced around in her head. She put the flowers next to the statue.

As she stood, she felt the urge to lean into him. To bury her face in the jacket he was wearing. Instead, she just stood back and stared again at the little headstone on the little grave. The finite hair on his knuckles brushed against hers. She shuffled her feet an inch to break the potential link.

“You off today?” James was fishing.

“Night shift,” she answered. James nodded, studying the ground. “You?”

“Long lunch.” He kicked a few leaves. “How are you?”

She exhaled. “I’m here.” He nodded in assent. The silence was to the point of suffocation, so she pulled out her car keys. “I better get going.”

“Yeah,” James pulled gloves out of his deep coat pockets.

“It’s nice you came.” Patricia had already started to turn away from him. He gave a sad smile, one she didn’t see. She turned completely from him, into the wind.

“Pat?” James called after her. She turned back to him, now with his gloves on. “Is it ever going to get easier?” he asked.

She pulled her lips in and shook her head no.

“That’s what I thought. Have a good shift.”

The date on the calendar was the same when Patricia awoke from her restless 2 hour nap to face the night shift at the Vanderbilt hospital. She looked at the red glowing numbers of the clock. It was seven. She still had 5 hours left of the day. She changed from her grey sweats into her plain blue scrubs and white tennis shoes. She tossed her hair into a bun and left without checking the mirror.

The winter night had already claimed what little natural light had occurred that day, the rest was an artificial fluorescent glow from hospital windows and steel parking lot lights glowing orange. Patricia shuddered as she walked through the glass sliding doors of the hospital, her gloveless hands numb. She tried to warm her hands on the elevator ride to the critical care unit. As she was rubbing her palms together, she focused on her naked left ring finger. If she squinted she could still see the tan line from the wedding ring.

“Good evening Patty!” Roy smiled at her as the elevator door opened and she stepped out.

“Hey there Roy,” she answered. Roy was one of the orderlies on the critical care floor. Roy was larger, she imagined him playing football as she passed him on the way to the nurse’s station.

“What brings you to critical care?” He had followed her and was leaning across the counter watching as she checked the white board.

“I’m just covering a shift is all,” Normally she was in the dialysis unit, during the day, but on this specific day of the 365 she faced annually, she wanted to stay as busy as possible as possible.

“You work too much.” He smiled at her as she gathered charts for rounds.

“Don’t I know it,” she said forcing a smile back. She brushed passed him, ending the conversation.

Her first stop was room 4604, to get the vitals on patient #33456776: Alexandra Rachel Wright.

Alex. The quirky teen from dialysis.

When she cracked the door, she noticed that all of the lights were off and the room was silent. It wasn’t late, but Alex was asleep. Patricia reached around the door and flipped on the bathroom light. Usually she didn’t feel bad about turning lights on sleeping patients. She hated to admit it, but on nights when her mood was particularly bad, she would find some pleasure it watching their faces crinkle and the arms come to their eyes to shield their sensitive pupils. It was different in this room.

“Alex?” Patricia called out into the dark room where, though she couldn’t see her, she knew Alex was.

“That’s me.” Her voice wasn’t rough with sleep, but cheerful, despite the major surgery she had endured during the morning hours.

“I have to take your vitals, so close your eyes for a minute, while I turn on the lights.” When she flipped the switched, she saw Alex with her eyes, behind black glasses, squeezed shut. It made her smile.

Alex opened one eye and looked at Patricia and then she opened the other.

“Sorry to wake you up,” Patricia pulled pen out of the pocket of her scrubs and approached the bed.

“I wasn’t asleep.” Alex adjusted herself and winced. “I wasn’t even trying to sleep.”

“Then why are all of the lights off?” Patricia pushed a few buttons on the heart monitor and jotted down numbers.

“Because it’s easier to think in the dark.”

“Is it?” Patricia hit a few buttons and jotted a few more numbers. She knew it was. She used to do the same thing in front of her TV, which she left off, at 3 in the morning.

“I used to tell my parents I was going to bed early, just so I could be alone in the dark to think. No distractions. Just me.”

“How’s that going?” Patricia closed the folder and put the pen in her pocket. She was venturing into strange territory, interacting with a patient and meaning it.

“I’ve been thinking about death a lot. But not in the morbid sense. In the matter of fact sense. Hey why are you here exactly?”

“I’m sorry?” Patricia was on her way to being offended.

“I didn’t mean it like it came out. I mean it like you were in a different unit and you weren’t my nurse this afternoon. Are you stalking me?”

“Perhaps.” Patricia smiled, a genuine smile, which caught even herself off guard. “I actually took a shift for a friend tonight.”

“Well that’s nice,” Alex turned to fix her pillow, but stopped herself and let out an unintentional moan.

“Let me,” Patricia fluffed while Alex adjusted, finding a spot where the stitches on her lower left back wouldn’t touch the starched white sheets. “I’m not actually that nice. She isn’t even a friend. I just needed to not be alone.” Patricia looked away from Alex. She knew that she had just given up an honest answer that was going to lead to more questions.

It didn’t. Alex looked at her, but asked nothing.

“My daughter’s birthday is today,” Patricia blurted out, “would have been today.” She closed the chart with Alex’s information. She had all the professional information she needed, but she wasn’t done in this room.

“What was her name?” Alex asked softly.

“Josephine.”

“Joey.” Alex shortened it. She had a penchant for making girl’s names into boy’s names. She gripped the rail as she shifted and pulled herself closer to the side of the bed that Patricia was near.

“How old was she?”

“8 months.” Patricia studied the white and mint green tiles of the floor. “It’s my fault.” She felt herself sag, her knees wanted to buckle under her, so she sat in the hospital chair next to Alex’ bed. She had never said that out loud to anyone. It slowly rotted her from the inside, the knowledge of what she had done, had let happen, but she never spoke of it. She looked at Alex in the fluorescent lighting

“I’m sure it’s not your fault. I’m sure you were a great mom,” Alex reached out and touched Patricia’s hand.

Patricia stood. Walking to the door, she felt like she was moving through sand.

“Everything looks good here. I’ll be back in four hours. Get your rest.” She turned off the lights and closed the door before Alex could say anything.

July 2011

It was 2 in the morning when Patricia woke. There was no crying. Josephine worked like a clock since the day she born. Feedings, burpings, naps. She knew when and she never fought it. It made Patricia laugh how even at months old, her daughter was as efficient and as goal oriented as she was. She would often rock Josephine on the porch and think about how she was already developing qualities that were going to make the world hers. The world was supposed to be hers.

She wasn't crying and that night the silence pierced Patricia's eardrums, slithered from her head to her body, transforming and flooding the soft-lining of her gut with doom. When she pushed herself into the pink room with Disney Princesses on the walls and looked in the crib, Josephine was asleep. Looked asleep. She was on her back, just like she was supposed to be, just how the nurse on the Maternity wing told Patricia to put her. The soft black hair on Josephine's head faced Patricia; she was facing the wall of the room that featured Princess Aurora.

Patricia leaned in and rubbed her back lightly, a nudge to confirm for her that her maternal instincts were shoddy. Josephine's small body moved with the force of her palm, but didn't stir anymore after. Patricia rubbed her back again, harder. She watched as Josephine's body rocked and stayed. Patricia's breath caught as she leaned over the crib and pulled Josephine to her. Her body was lukewarm and still cooling as Patricia cradled her in her arms and screamed for James. Her temperature continued to drop under Patricia's breath, an attempt at CPR in the passenger seat of her SUV, the SUV that James was driving, without a seatbelt on, to the hospital. Josephine's tiny green eyes remained closed under lids when she was taken from Patricia's shaking hands by nurses in the ER of the very same hospital were Patricia learned how to spot death even before it had completely arrived.

Josephine's eyes remained closed. Her face would remain the same sweet sleeping face that Patricia looked at one last time before shutting off the lights when she put her to bed at 8PM the night before. Fifteen minutes after she walked Josephine around the room, bouncing her softly against her chest and singing "You are My Sunshine."

"There's nothing we can do." The doctor confirmed her terror.

James clutched her hand as the last syllable of the sentence hit them both. They were sitting in a private room, a room allotted her because she was a nurse, a well liked nurse, one of their own and she deserved a room away from the public to gather her thoughts and to hear the words she knew were coming but wanted to avoid. She couldn't clutch his hand back. She felt herself falling and the white tile floor of the small room allotted to her was getting closer to her face, the bridge of her nose, before she felt James' grab her under her arms and ease her to the cold ground, joining her and pulling her face into his shoulder, waiting for her to wail and cry and hit him in the chest, to react like a mother who had lost her only child.

"It's looking like SIDS," the doctor answered when Patricia finally found enough of her previously dissipated energy to ask what had ripped her child from her.

"No," James had told her, begged her, when she pushed herself up from his chest and asked the question. She wished she hadn't asked, that the doctor hadn't answered when she looked up at James and saw how quickly he had been mutated by her dialogue with the doctor. His eyes were blood shot, brimmed with tears. He was trying to keep himself together, sacrificing his emotions to let Patricia succumb to her own. She had refused though, and in a selfish move turned to the only place in her being the allowed her to deal with tragedy as a business. She would be the nurse.

She stayed the nurse, even when she could finally push herself off of the floor to see the shell of her daughter in the hospital crib. The walls of the room were white, there were no princesses here. James gripped her side as they stepped close enough to see her. There was no color to her. Josephine was as white as the princess-less walls. Patricia stuck her hand out and placed it under Josephine's small left hand. Usually Josephine would squeeze Patricia's index and middle finger. There was no reflex though. So Patricia squeezed the hand, the skin cold, the tiny nails white, turning a cool blue.

James coughed. It wasn't a real cough, but a cough to disguise a sob. Patricia placed Josephine's hand next to her body and looked up at James, who was biting his bottom lip so hard the skin was pulled white. She lifted her thumb to his lip that was locked under his teeth and gently pulled it free. She still had nothing to say, so she gently pushed his head onto her shoulder. As his forehead touched her right shoulder, his body shuddered.

"It's not fair," was all he could say. All he could repeat as he wrapped his arms around her.

December 2012

sRoy was digging through the jar of old candies at the nurses' station when Patricia returned to get the next chart and to enter Alex's vitals.

"You alright there lovely lady?" he asked, popping an old butterscotch into his cheek.

"Yup. Just fine Roy," she said, not looking at him.

"You sure? You look pale. You sick?"

"Gas station sandwich," she said as she typed briefly tapping her stomach.

"Oh," He leaned over the counter closer. "Gotta watch out for those things." He bit down on the butterscotch and it shattered against his teeth.

"Yup." She pushed herself out of the chair and away from the computer. "Well, no rest for the wicked," she said as she grabbed a handful of charts and headed for the next room on the wing, not waiting for him to respond.

Patricia was able to avoid her vivid thoughts about Josephine until 4 am, when it was time to check on Alex. She stood outside of the thick wooden door to Alex's room, contemplating just filling in the same numbers and skipping the vitals. No one would know, the floor was almost deserted, except for the other night shift nurse, who was tasked to take the vitals of the patients on the opposite of the hall. Even Roy had called it a night.

She huffed and pushed open the door. She could never do that to a patient, even one who stirred something in her so violently raw that she vowed not to relive again. All of the lights were off, and this time Patricia was sure Alex was sleeping. She clicked the lights above the bed, and

they hummed as they sent the harsh fluorescent glow over Alex. She was propped up with her eyes closed and her glasses still on; an open notebook was resting in her lap. She looked as if she hadn't intended to fall asleep. Patricia stepped lightly on the tips of her toes to avoid waking Alex. She finally made it to the bed side in complete silence.

The way Alex was sleeping didn't look comfortable to Patricia at all, but she didn't want to adjust Alex and risk waking her up from whatever sleep she was actually able to get. As she pressed the buttons on the machine which recorded Alex's vitals, she noticed that on the page of the open notebook was a sketch. Completed in pencil was a drawing of an angel with intricate and massive wings, holding a swaddled child. The first portion of the picture was being etched over in blue ink. She finished filling in stats and put down the chart, and decided to examine the picture. She lifted the notebook off of Alex's lap and put the drawing under the light. As she examined it, she noticed a branch protruding from an undrawn tree. The branch sat right above the angels head. Wrapped around the limb was the bottom half of the body of a snake, the top half was hanging off the branch and was inches away from the infant in the angel's arms.

She returned the notebook to Alex's lap. She was supposed to take Alex's pulse and heart rate, but for once couldn't muster enough of her professional side to actually wake her. Instead, she leaned over and gently removed the glasses from Alex's face. Alex sighed and breathed softly, turning her head to the other side. Patricia put the glasses on the table next to the bed and took one more look at the half finished drawing before turning off the overhead lights.

When her shift was finally nearing its end and the sun was well on its way to being up at 8 am, Patricia decided she was going to stop by Alex's room one last time. She was just about to turn the corner of the nurse's station when she saw Louise, her relief nurse, coming from the elevator.

“Good morning Patty!” Louise’s voice reminded Patricia of a cartoon character, maybe Minnie Mouse, but with a slight Southern twang. She tried to hide her involuntary grimace. She may have already been up for 12+ hours, but she knew no one should sound that perky so early in the morning.

“Morning Louise.” She hoped she didn’t sound annoyed. If she did, Louise ignored her and continued on.

“I just want to thank you so much for covering my shift last night! I would have died going back to back to back like that.”

“Not a problem,” Patricia mustered a smile and turned to start down the hall.

“Leaving without saying goodbye? I won’t hold it against you; I know how these night shifts are.” Louise let out a small fake laugh and Patricia turned to catch her wink.

God help her patients today Patricia thought.

“No, just grabbing the vitals on one more patient before I go, I completely blanked on getting her pulse.” She tucked Alex’s folder against her side as if she were hiding a secret document.

“Oh now, don’t worry about that! I’ll take care of it as soon as I’m settled in here,” Louise was stashing her purse in a filing cabinet as she said it. Patricia knew she was just trying to be nice, but she felt herself getting frustrated. She didn’t know what was with these hospital people and their need to continue unrequested conversations.

“I got it,” she snipped, giving Louise one more smile to stave off offense. As she walked down the hall to room 4604, she told herself the truth about why she wanted to finish up the last chart. She knew Louise would have been diligent and fill in her blanks immediately. It wasn’t about the actual chart at all. It was the drawing. Since she had turned off the light earlier in the

morning, she could not stop thinking about the picture of the angel and the baby. She could not mentally settle why a snake was looking over the child at the same height of the angel's serene face. She had decided at 6 am after 2 hours of coming up with no explanation that she would simply ask Alex.

Patricia was thinking about how she would be able to broach the subject of the drawing, if she even could, since the last words they exchanged were heavy with feelings about Josephine. When she opened the door to the room, she found that Alex's mother had pulled a chair up next to her and was showing her some photos in a *People* magazine. Patricia's shoulders sagged at the sight.

"Now see, look at her hair, you could do your hair like that ya know? Bob it long? Look they call that a 'Lob' isn't that clever?" Alex's mother elbowed her lightly. Alex rolled her eyes.

"Extremely." Alex was looking at the magazine, but not actually seeing the photos that her mother's well manicured nails were pointing to.

Patricia cleared her throat as she came further into the room. Alex looked up and her expression changed. She smiled as Patricia approached.

"Good morning Alex," Patricia returned the smile.

"Alexandra" Her mother corrected Patricia. "I swear I don't know why you prefer to go by a boy's name."

Alex shook her head subtly at Patricia "I think outside of the box."

Patricia felt a small laugh in the back of her throat, so she cleared it. "I just need to fill in some of the information on your chart Alex..." Patricia looked over at Alex's mother, who was grimacing. "...andra"

“Okay,” Alex turned to her mother who had decided her part in the nurse exchange had been concluded and was reading a story about celebrity adoption scandals in the magazine.

“Mom, you might want to leave the room for this, it’s pretty gruesome. Needles and stitches and stuff.” Her mother shuddered.

“I’ll go get coffee. I’ll be back in a bit. Here take this. Find a cut you like, so we can liven up this hair when you are out of here.” Her mother handed her the magazine.

“Will do,” Alex closed the magazine and dropped it into the waste basket next to her bed as her mother, make up perfect and long brown hair curled and pinned, sauntered out in her heels and skirt with a slit in the back. Patricia made sure the door was closed before she spoke.

“You do know I don’t have to do any of that stuff right?” Patricia said as she opened the chart and clicked her pen.

“Oh I know, but Jennifer isn’t good with either of those things, and I was ready for a break, she has been talking about Heidi Klum’s hair for the past hour”

“Jennifer?” Patricia asked.

“My mom. She didn’t introduce herself. She tends to just expect people to know who she is, I think. Jennifer is a little self-absorbed.”

“Ah, I see” Patricia said putting the chart on the side table and taking blood pressure cuff off the monitoring stand. Alex pushed her gown sleeve up and stuck her arm up.

“So thank you, you just bought me fifteen, fashion-less minutes of peace.”

Patricia smiled as she pumped the cuff. She could hear the air moving swiftly for a few pumps.

“I didn’t mean to upset you last night,” Alex said. Patricia’s stomach dipped.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” She pumped the cuff a few more times. “I should be the one apologizing to you. The way I behaved was unprofessional.”

“I think you acted perfectly human. I would be worried if you didn’t feel anything.” Alex replied, keeping her eyes locked on Patricia.

Patricia had to look away. She continued to pump the cuff full of air while trying to focus on something, anything out the window.

“Do you think maybe you can take my pressure now? It’s getting a bit tight.”

Patricia looked to see that the veins below the cuff were starting to pulse and her skin was starting to tint.

“Shit.” She released the cuff, air hissed out between them.

“Is that medical terminology?” Alex laughed.

“It absolutely is.” Patricia readjusted the cuff. “Can I try this again?”

Alex smiled and nodded. As Patricia started to pump the cuff again she noticed the notebook on the side table closest to the window.

“That’s my doodling notebook.”

“Aren’t you nervous just leaving it out like that?”

“No, I don’t think anyone who doesn’t need to see it will see it.”

Patricia stopped pumping the cuff before deadening Alex’s arm again and took the pressure. As she released it, she knew she had to confess.

“I saw it. Last night. Open.” The sound of the Velcro as she took off the cuff cut through the end of her confession “it was a picture.”

“I know.” Alex answered, unblinking. “I just wish I had finished it before you had seen it, but I couldn’t keep my eyes open.” Patricia put the cuff back in the basket.

“It’s done now though.” Alex reached over and grabbed the notebook, sucking in a painful breath as the stitches on her back stretched with her movement. She opened it to the page that held the picture of the angel, but the picture had been carefully torn out. Patricia looked at it, now shaded in blue ink and with coloring in certain spots. The snake was an emerald green.

“I hope you don’t mind.” Alex said.

“Mind?” the word came out without thought, she was absorbed in the picture.

“It’s you.” Alex answered. Sliding a finger down the edge of the page “and Joey.”

Patricia’s breath hitched. Her peaceful unease had returned to her.

“Me?” she asked as Alex’s tapped the snake that was precariously close to the child.

Patricia noticed though, that the snake wasn’t menacing; there was no forked tongue, no traces of the sin that follows the serpent.

She was about to ask Alex what that meant, but the door creaked open.

“There are thousands of people here. You would think one of them would help me find some strong coffee that wasn’t cold. Oh. Still with the stitches? Because I can come back.”

“No, we are done here,” she smiled as she felt a lump in the back of her throat. “Stay on this road to recovery Alexandra,” she said as she turned, picking up Alex’s medical chart. She caught a contemptuous smile from Alex. “Another nurse will be in within a few hours to check on you.”

“Not you?” Alex asked, her voice, for once hinting at her being a child.

“Shift’s over. I am back in dialysis this afternoon,” Patricia answered shrugging

“And we are certainly not going back there are we?” Alex’s mother interjected, flashing a smile at Alex.

“You better take this now then,” Alex said ignoring her mother and holding the paper out to Patricia.

She had more questions for Alex about the drawing, she didn't feel it was even her place to take the drawing, but she was certainly not going to discuss anything in front of Alex's mother. She came back to the bed and gave Alex a quizzical look as she took the notebook paper. Alex gave her a reassuring nod.

“Alexandra where is that magazine?” her mother asked her as she settled back into her seat, effectively ending their unspoken conversation.

“I think it fell in the trash,” Patricia heard Alex say as she left the room. She dropped the chart off at the nurses' station and grabbed her keys, thankful that Louise was already on her rounds. As she rode the elevator down to the hospital parking lot, she studied the drawing again. She was the snake.

The meaning nagged at her as she left the lot, squinting into the sun, and drove home. When she finally got into her house, the home she no longer shared with anyone, she decided to forgo the sleep she could feel her body begging for and research what the snake represented. What Alex wanted her to get from it. She sat on the couch and clicked on entry after entry on the internet.

An hour later Patricia's mind was brimming with possibilities. She could be good or evil. A guardian or a carrier of vindictiveness. Poison or healing. She shut her computer and rubbed her eyes, which were starting to cross with exhaustion. The night shift was taking a toll on her physically and the conundrum of Alex and the snake was exhausting her mentally.

She decided to listen to her body and finally sleep. She took the drawing with her as she started for her bedroom. As she trudged down the hallway, she stopped outside the second door

on the right. It was closed and had a pink J hanging from a pink ribbon on a nail hammered in the door a year and a day ago. She hadn't been back in this room since she left for the hospital in the middle of the night with an infant that wouldn't return.

She could hear herself breathing, and feel her hand shaking as she turned and pushed the knob. She stood at the threshold of the door. It looked just like it did when it was occupied. She didn't know what she was expecting there to be. It had only been four months; the walls were still a fresh pink, the princess cutouts still stuck smooth to the walls, full of false promises of Disney magic and happy endings. The pink curtains were still closed, making the sunlight in the room a warm pink; the rays of light slipping through the blinds highlighting the empty white rocking chair that was pulled next to the empty white crib.

She knew she shouldn't, but she went in anyway, closing the door behind her. She made her way to the rocking chair and sat. She allowed herself to rock the chair, a rhythmic creak escaping every time she rocked back. She looked at the drawing again.

The snake. She rocked the chair harder. She let her finger slide across the swaddled child. The tip of her index finger caressing what little of the infant's face stuck out of the blanket.

The picture started to blur as she tried to blink back tears. One fell onto the corner of the page and smudged the ink of the branch. She wanted to stop herself, but she couldn't. One tear turned into a constant stream down her cheeks, sliding down to her neck and the joining of her collar bones. Her throat vibrated with sobs that she couldn't hold back anymore. So she let them out to bounce around the corners of the pink room. She pulled her feet off of the floor and her knees into her chest, allowing her tears a new direction, down her neck to the thin cloth of her scrubs. Alex's drawing was crumpled between Patricia's chest and knees, making a small rustling with every heave.

