

## ABSTRACT

Watching Them, Watching Him: A Novella

Katrina Youngblood

Director: Arna Hemenway

Watching Them, Watching Him is a short novella featuring an infectious disease doctor by the name of Ari Nadim thrust into an epidemic. He is a doctor fresh out of residency with a hero complex that is quickly destroyed after he fails to save his patients from a horrible disease. The reader watches the doctor fall into anxiety and a depressive state as he's forced to shift his mental framework from his own eyes and those of the people around him, including a dying patient, a nurse, and his partner. It is an exploration into the forced perfection of physicians and the harmful effects of the hero complex that many physicians carry. Mainly, however, the purpose of this thesis was to learn *how* to write a novel.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

---

Mr. Arna Hemenway, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

---

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

WATCHING THEM, WATCHING HIM: A NOVELLA

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

Katrina Youngblood

Waco, Texas

May 2017

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	iii
Watching Him, Watching Them	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1
Bibliography	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	75

## PREFACE

### An Introduction to the Novella

As a sophomore honors student, I was tasked with discovering what pressing question would make me curious enough to spend the next few years researching in order to answer it. As a pre-medical student, it was practically an expectation that I would participate in lab research of some kind, yet I didn't find myself drawn to the lab bench, not for lack of opportunity. I began to look around at other options and, while perusing the monument of previous year's theses in the Baylor Honors office, I discovered a massive volume written by Leslie Calhoun, a fantasy novel from 2014 that utterly entranced me for the next several hours. I have always been an obsessive reader and am seldom without a story in my head or hands, but I had never had the confidence to take the leap and write my own. I often prided myself on my ability to write a good essay and my English teachers seemed to agree, even to the point of dragging me into their office to recruit me for the UIL Creative Writing team to great success. However, going from award-winning four-page essays to an eighty-page novella was an unanticipated challenge. My arrogance caught up to me, and I soon realized that I had underestimated the work that went into every story I had ever read; however, I was determined to discover firsthand the challenge involved in my favorite pastime.

My work began with a careful study of the styles of many of the writers that I found remarkable to see what made their stories compelling to read. I had to figure out what aspects of a story made it interesting to me to be able to write a story that would be

interesting to my readers. If a story bores even the writer, then it will never be able to coerce the audience into feeling anything.

I had never read a story as a writer before, and I found that extraordinarily difficult as I would often catch myself sinking into the narrative, consuming the fiction thoughtlessly, but eventually, the unique perspectives of writing began to intrigue me once I began to actively look for the unconventional. I find Stephen King exceptional because with every book he forces me to question the nature of humanity and morality, turning some aspect of my worldview on its head at every conclusion. Rick Riordan breathes life into his characters and forces his readers to understand them, if not love them, by showing how the world could be shaped through each one's eyes, begging the reader to see the complexity of motivation. Douglas Adams leaves profound revelations hiding underneath a wit sharper than a sword, leaving the reader thinking for hours after reading what they thought was simply a comedic story about a space-traveling Brit. The more I read to write, the more I realized the versatility of a story and how it can shape a reader. I was going to have to discover what would make my story unique and useful.

As a pre-medical student passionate about medicine and endlessly curious about the life of doctors, I knew that I wanted to explore something from the eyes of a physician. However, my exposure to fictional medical literature was extremely limited, which is where Chris Adrian came in. As both a writer and a physician, Adrian held a talent set that I needed to understand if I wanted to follow in his footsteps.

I have spent a lot of time in hospitals over the years, but, as one of the most complicated systems on the planet, the modern hospital drew me to a halt during my writing process. Adrian's short story, "A Tiny Feast", and the epic-length novel, *A*

*Children's Hospital*, provided me with a roadmap to writing a story in a hospital setting. These narratives were also essential to discovering the tone that I wanted my story to take whilst dealing intimately with the issues of death and mental health.

I couldn't simply write about a physician, but had an intrinsic need to write about something personal as well for my first foray into fiction-writing. Since I was in high school, I have fought against depression and anxiety in my daily life and have found a fascination in mental illness as a result. The stigma surrounding mental health is one of the issues brought up in my story. The main character, Ari Nadim, refuses to see his panic attack and depressive episode for what they are out of arrogance. He doesn't want to think that something like that could happen to him: an intelligent, successful physician in the prime of his life. The fear of being thought of as incompetent prevents Ari, and many other physicians, from asking for help when his anxiety spirals out of control, creating an emotional crisis later in the story.

The psychosocial stress and trauma that many physicians experience during their lives is quickly becoming an epidemic in itself, much larger than the one discussed within the pages of this book. Some surveys report that as much as 58% of physicians experience at least one symptom of physician burnout with more than 40% displaying more severe emotional exhaustion (Williams 2007:205). It causes many physicians to quit their jobs, fall into harmful behaviors, or even commit suicide. The suicide rate among physicians is significantly higher than for the average person. For men, doctors are 40% more likely to commit suicide than the average male, and for women, the divide is even greater at a distressing 130% increase (Schernhammer 2005:2473). Yet, doctors are ashamed to discuss this issue and frequently shove it under the rug.

The kinds of stresses that a physician must deal with are unique to the profession. A mistake in judgment with a patient could easily lead to someone's death, which lends itself to many moral quandaries. In answer to this responsibility, the public has placed extraordinary pressure on physicians to be perfect, an aspect that would make them simultaneously more and less than human if it were true. After failing to meet that expectation of perfection, many doctors struggle with anxiety, self-doubt, lack of sleep, and a significant blow to their reputation amongst their peers (Waterman et al. 2007:470). This novella is meant to address the culture of perfection that physicians have taken into their identity and how damaging it can be to the psyche.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Professor Hemenway, my advisor on this project, for supporting me through the bull ride that this project embodied. I almost gave up and changed my project several times, but he believed that I could create a story worth telling. I'll leave it to the reader to decide whether I accomplished that goal.



## WATCHING HIM, WATCHING THEM

### A Novella

Seeing him, it was easy for Joyce to see that he sat in a position of power. He didn't radiate power like most natural-born leaders, but he did wear it. He wore it on his shoulders as they sat just a bit too high on his neck. He wore it in the omnipresent wrinkle on his brow, despite the fact that he was still quite young. Responsibility pulled the strings taut at the corners of his mouth like a puppeteer. His power sat deep in the pockets of his white coat like rocks, weighing it down.

Dr. Ari Nadim hadn't been working in Joyce's hospital wing for very long, but the change in him since he started had been drastic. As a nurse, Joyce thought she tended to see more than the average person, as nurses aren't often seen. A good nurse is capable of sneaking into the crankiest patient's room in the middle of the night to check vitals unseen and unheard. On the other hand, doctors often draw every bit of attention as soon as they walk into a room. They are seldom unnoticed wherever they go in their workspace. However, they also sit with this hawk on their shoulders that just waits for them to screw up, waiting and willing to sue and strip away their medical license in an instant. They have a little voice that whispers, "You could have saved that woman if only you had been better," and "That child is dead because you weren't good enough. It's all your fault." It's an insidious voice that grows in their brains sometime during their

residencies and doesn't disappear until long after they retire, as there is always at least one patient that haunts a doctor to their deathbed.

Most doctors that have been around a while have learned to live with that weight, but Dr. Nadim had been taking a while to realize that his real job was a bit different than the vacation that was residency. As the only doctor on shift, he had no backup, no resident to watch his back and make sure he didn't accidentally kill someone.

The other nurses must have seen him struggling to adjust to that lifestyle. Joyce saw them walk by him hunched over his desk in the center station every day with worried yet judgmental eyes as he pored over paperwork with a frown. They still did their jobs (well, at least most of them did anyways), but they didn't seem to take Dr. Nadim's fledgling status into account as they dropped issue after issue in his pockets when, to Joyce, he already seemed like he was drowning. Perhaps they didn't particularly care if he broke. As long as it didn't affect them, their patients, or the amount of work they were assigned, the other nurses at Stillwater Community Hospital were just fine with leaving the situation alone.

Joyce tried to help out where she could. Being a nurse in an understaffed hospital was insane on a good day, but with three new patients with some weird-as-hell disease, she had her hands full trying not to get exposed to whatever they had while cleaning the vomit and shit from their bodies. This did not particularly make for a pleasant week for her or her patients. Trying to do part of Dr. Nadim's work for him with

everything else on her plate was getting to be a bit too much. There was only so much overtime a nurse can do in a hospital that small, and her daughter was starting to miss her mama, regardless what the teenager said. She wanted to help, but, God, she was tired. At that point, Dr. Nadim was running out of time to get his shit together.

-||-

As Joyce was making her first set of rounds one Tuesday morning, she walked into the room of one of her new patients to see what she assumed to be the man's son sleeping in the chair next to the bed. The fact that he was sleeping wasn't exactly surprising due to the fact that it was six o'clock in the morning, but the fact that there was anyone at all here shocked her. Charlie Fowell had been sitting in his room completely alone doing his best to starve to death for three days, surviving off IV fluids that really only do so much. Joyce had half a mind to wake the teen up and ask him where the hell he had been, where anybody had been for this man, but she had seen too many patients die alone to potentially cause the teen to get angry and leave. She was terrified of chasing away any semblance of comfort Charlie might get from having him there.

The boy seemed to be in his late teens and looked to her like a problem child. He wore baggy clothes and she could tell his underwear was hanging out of his pants even seated. He would have easily looked at home on a street corner asking people passing

by if they needed a little something to get them through the day. She knew this type of visitor without even seeing him conscious. Any form of judgment or discomfort is often enough to get them to slip out of the hospital without a word, indifferent to the fact that their family member or friend is playing 'ding-dong-ditch' with Death, so keeping quiet was really the only option for her, which, despite what her husband might say, was something she excelled at in the right situations. Joyce had always been able to tell when words were needed or when it was best just to leave someone be in their anger, tears, or whatever else. She considered it one of her best qualities as a nurse.

However, as she was taking Charlie's blood pressure, Joyce noticed him stirring in his bed, and she thought perhaps a few words were needed for him. He squinted his eyes open in the twilight of the room, and she leaned down to him and whispered, "I believe you've added a heartbeat to your room, Charlie, and I don't think this one has any more needles for you."

She smiled fondly as his eyes widened and head whipped around, pulling at all sorts of tubes as he searched for his visitor. As his gaze fell on the sleeping figure, tension seeped out of his body like the tide pulling out. He turned back to her and reached for her hand, beaming. Through the tubes and tape, she accepted his offering while the man squeezed his eyes together in an attempt to keep the tears from falling down his face. He looked at her and croaked, "That's my son, Alexis. I've been in here for three days and he's been out there by himself this whole time. He ain't got nobody else to take care of him. I hadn't heard from him at all, not this whole time."

The tears made their way onto the bed despite his efforts to hold them back, and he cried silently, desperate not to wake his son sleeping only a few feet away. “I was so worried,” he whispered, “He never really tells me what he gets up to when he goes out, ya’ know, but I know that it’s not something his momma would be proud to hear.”

Joyce squeezed his hand and grabbed a tissue from the side table as she knelt beside the bed. Handing it to him, she whispered back, “Well, it looks like he made it here somehow, Charlie, and, speaking as a nurse, I don’t see a scratch on him.”

Charlie dropped her hand and rubbed at his face with the back of his hand. “I don’t know what I’m thinking, crying in front of a sweet lady like you.”

“Ain’t no shame in being grateful your child is safe. If I knew my daughter had been missing, you’d better believe that I’d be blubbering like a baby when she came back to me,” Joyce scolded. Charlie just smiled, unable to tear his eyes away from his boy. “*You’d* best believe that that boy is gonna get the fussin’ of a lifetime when he wakes up. He’s lucky I can’t get out of this bed right now or else it’d be a helluva lot more than that! I’m too old to deal with his going off all willy-nilly,” he whispered, a gleam in his eye that Joyce didn’t think was just left over from the crying.

She finished taking his vitals and setting the IV drip with the new medicine Dr. Nadim had prescribed, and slipped out of the room, leaving Charlie to his devious plans. After completing the rest of her rounds, Joyce walked back to the central station and started writing on her personal never-ending story (also read: charting). She swears that

every time she looks at the computer, she has exponentially more to note and select and file. They're always coming out with new programs and systems that throw her into a tizzy trying to figure it out in addition to juggling all her patients. She swears they want her to spend all her time with her paperwork instead of actually helping the sick, like she's meant to do, but who is she, but a damn lowly nurse. Joyce scoffed as she got back to work.

-||-

Joyce looked up as Dr. Nadim walked past the nursing station, looking determined. Determined to do what, she wasn't exactly sure, but she knew it didn't involve being here as he sped past. She had to wonder what had him looking so frazzled today since he always took such great pains to appear ready and prepared for anything. Well, he hadn't often succeeded, but he tried nonetheless. She smirked at the thought and decided to put off her charting for a little longer while she went to see if the dark-haired man needed any help, as it didn't look like anyone else even looked away from their computer screens or the resident gossip monger to consider that someone might need their help. For nurses, she would think they would be a little more observant, but she assumed they were being very observant towards whatever they deemed more important at the moment.

Getting up from her chair, Joyce followed him down the hallway. He seemed to be heading into a recently cleared patient's room. A woman with heart failure had resided there until last night until she had had an aneurysm that instantly killed her from what Joyce had heard. The woman hadn't been her patient but seemed nice nonetheless during the brief interaction they had had when she changed her IV out for her after the machine had gone off.

She found him tearing the empty room apart, looking for something. She was mildly surprised the room was still patient-less. They seldom had time to clear out a room before the next one got sent up from the ER or from their family doctor. However, the room was pristine, or at least it was before Dr. Nadim came tearing through it like a cat with a wild hair.

"And just what exactly are you doing?" Joyce asked, clearly scaring the crap out of the poor boy as he jumped about three feet in the air while holding an empty pillowcase, the pillow having slipped out onto the floor.

"I -uh- think I left my notebook in this room yesterday afternoon as I was checking up on Ms. Ottoi. She quite nearly forced me to show her what I had written about her case, thinking that I was keeping something from her, or maybe even plotting something," he paused, "which given her subsequent death last night and the fact that I'm ransacking her room today, I might be coming off as quite suspicious."

Looking awkwardly at the ceiling then, he muttered, "If you could forget the majority of what I just told you, I would appreciate that."

Joyce couldn't help but giggle at him. Knowing that there was certainly some sort of devious twinkle in her eye, she mused, "One certainly has to wonder when they're met with such suspicious circumstances. What exactly are you hiding in that journal of yours, Dr. Nadim?"

She walked across the doorway to the other side of the expansive room (Ms. Ottoi had been a rather rich woman) pensively. "One could almost say that I've caught you red-handed!" She declared as she raised her hand up with the red journal tucked neatly in her grasp. She began to leaf through the pages, looking at page upon page of case notes and crude drawings, each entry neatly inscribed with dates and names.

The doctor stood up straight, slack-jawed, "Where did you find that? I've been looking all day. Also, I'm pretty sure you're violating HIPAA in at least three different ways by looking at that; please stop."

"Nurses have many mysterious ways that doctors cannot comprehend. For example, we know how to make the crankiest of patients cooperate with one insidious whisper in their ear. We can sneak in and out of rooms without you ever knowing we were there like ninjas!" She did her best ninja pose. "Also, you shouldn't just leave your journal containing information that could violate HIPAA lying around where just any nurse can pick it up, like the central station right next to our resident gossipmonger. Courtlynn could have had your head for that if I hadn't snatched it up first simply because she was looking too happy about holding it."



Dr. Nadim began to look a mixture of sheepish and irritated at that, probably because she was still flipping through the journal. Not because she was actually reading much of anything, although she did notice that the closer she got to the present, the more ragged the pages looked and more holes were in the paper from pressing too hard. She was mostly just teasing him. Someone around here had to do it. Most of the others simply treated him as a superior or a colleague to his face. Sure, he was new, but Joyce didn't think he'd found a single person apart from her comfortable enough around him to mess with him. Joyce was of the firm belief that you weren't really friends with someone until you can make fun of them or call them names. It's a level of knowledge about the other person to know that they're either saying something about a mistake so someone else that doesn't care about them doesn't, or that they don't actually mean what they say at all and they're just joking. There's a kind of camaraderie that comes with that because, to Joyce, it seems like once she's at that level with someone, it's a kind of contract to defend them against others saying the same stuff she had just mentioned twenty minutes ago.

Joyce was attempting to test the waters to see if she could start messing with him. She liked the boy, really, but he needed to remove the rod from his spine at some point.

In their meeting the next morning, all the doctors working on the fourth floor gathered to discuss any interesting cases after their initial rounds. This was a weekly occurrence that Ari usually appreciated because, as a new doctor mostly left to his own devices in the Infectious Disease Unit, he often needed to pick the others' brains for ideas and suggestions. Most everyone offered advice at some point during those meetings, but only the doctors that had been working there for five years or less generally asked for the help with a few notable exceptions. Mostly, the older doctors didn't want to appear like they couldn't function on their own.

Despite his usual openness in talking about his patients, Ari didn't want to discuss his mysterious patients that day. The laboratory had been swamped the past couple of days and none of his tests had come back promptly. With this, he knew that he would be asked way too many questions that he would not have an answer to. He'd been made out to be a fool entirely too much in residency to not know better than to come in with incomplete information.

The chatter went on around him for a while, with discussion flitting between cases and what new car their orthopedic surgeon had bought this month. The specialists and general physicians were easily separated into two groups with both shooting condescending glances toward the other. The internists, the group he preferred to stay closer to despite his specialization, were the ones discussing their patients' lives and social needs while the specialists discussed their own amazing breakthroughs and money mostly. The gap between them was yawning.

Then, a hand clapped down on his shoulder with the force of a charging elephant behind it. Ari flinched and reached up to grab the hand out of instinct. “You’re unusually quiet today, Ari!”

Looking behind him at the person attached to the hand, Ari smiled and said, “Hello to you, too, Dr. Michalski. I’m fine! Thanks for asking.”

Dr. Michalski was a boisterous man, an internist who worked in the urinary and gynecological ward down the hall. Ari thought that he was the kind of guy that probably got called Santa a lot in the winter time.

“Oh, come off it now! Don’t be like that. You normally participate in these sorts of things, rather vociferously if I am recalling the last meeting correctly with that cardiologist trying to steal your patient,” Dr. Michalski said with a wink.

“First of all, the man was clearly not having any sort of cardiogenic problem, so he had no business trying to take over my case. Secondly, I have a lot on my mind today.” Ari turned his face away from the well-meaning, but very nosy, man and attempted to start a conversation with the woman sitting on his other side. However, it was useless. Partially because he had no idea who she was, but mostly because there was no stopping Dr. Michalski when he got a whiff of something interesting.

“Well then! Why don’t you share with the class? We are all here to help each other out after all.” The internist couldn’t control the volume of his voice if he was whispering in a funeral. Dr. Michalski’s outside voice tended to gather everyone’s attention rather quickly, and Ari could already see a few heads turning in their direction.

He attempted to placate the man with reassurances that his cases were still under control and that they probably just had some sort of lengthy stomach bug that he hadn't gotten to test for yet.

However, Ari knew that he had lost the second that he had said the word 'case'. Dr. Michalski perked up even further (which shouldn't be anatomically possible) and beamed at him. "Now, now, stomach bugs or not. Multiple unknowns can still be very dangerous, particularly in your neck of the woods. It couldn't hurt to get some advice. Let's see what the others have to say after we've all heard the whole story!"

Ari thought that it could very well hurt to get some advice once he had been publicly grilled and humiliated. The internist's booming voice had successfully gathered everyone's attention, though, and they were all looking at them expectantly, waiting for him to give them a puzzle to solve. He swears it was like one of those classroom Jeopardy games, except that everyone there was the most competitive kid in class.

"Well..." Ari fortified himself for his explanation by flipping through the pages of his journal despite having everything regarding these particular cases memorized from looking at them so much. The next five to ten minutes would be his personal definition of hell. "I have three, possibly four patients all with very similar symptoms of high fever, vomiting, diarrhea, and burst capillaries in their sclera. They're highly uncomfortable but remain conscious and communicative with the exception of the first patient, which was a seventy-two-year-old woman who fell unconscious yesterday and has not reawakened hence." He paused here, uncertain whether he should share what he heard about from

one of the more unreliable nurses yesterday evening. “Also, one of the patients appears to have had blood in their vomit, although I am unsure whether that is due to the excessive vomiting or if that is a symptom in and of itself.”

Several doctors got a pensive look on their faces as they began to either mutter to themselves or to their seatmates. It was like he had suddenly walked into a sanatorium, he thought with a quirk of his lips.

“Well that could be an endless number of things. What tests have you run? Have you tested for typhus and cholera? What about dysentery? What about gastroenteritis, visceral leishmaniosis? How long have they been here?” The questions began to pipe up from all over the room in rapid-fire succession. Ari thought that he should probably be used to getting bombarded with questions by now, but he could never follow them after three or more.

“They’ve been here between three and five days now with their symptoms having begun about a week ago for all except the previously mentioned seventy-two-year-old female. As for the other tests, apart from the standard blood, urine, stool, vomitus cultures, which I’m still waiting for the results for, I have been unable to test for much while the lab has been so busy the past couple of days.” He sighs, knowing that this would only be heard as an excuse.

“Well, have you considered doing your own tests then? They do teach us these things in med school for a reason,” another voice chimes in from the other side of the room.

And that was it. Now that the floodgates of reproach had been opened, it seemed that every doctor had to offer their advice or scorn, hardly giving him more than a second to sputter out an excuse or a “Yes, that might have been a better choice.”

Ari shut down for a while and spoke on autopilot until Dr. Michalski’s voice pulled him out with a touch on his shoulder, voice uncharacteristically gentle. “Don’t you think that this sounds like the start of one of those hemorrhagic fevers, like Ebola or Marburg virus? Particularly, the red eye part caught my attention.”

Well no, he hadn’t thought of that, but now he had and he was terrified, so thank you, Dr. Michalski.

“From what I’ve seen so far, the disease doesn’t seem to be quite as contagious as Marburg or Ebola as none of their family members have come down with the disease, but that is a good idea to look into, thank you,” Ari plastered on a smile, mind racing with anxious thoughts of infection and modes of transmission. Having chosen to specialize in infectious diseases himself, Ari was used to walking around with a certain level of risk at all times, but the words ‘hemorrhagic fever’ carried an immense weight to anyone in the medical profession. They brought images of bodies falling apart from multiple organ systems failure, bodies laid out in a row, waiting to be buried in a mass grave, the sick lying in beds crying tears of blood that they couldn’t stop if they tried. They didn’t tend to be pleasant diseases, and there were very few ones of the lot that had any sort of vaccine or cure. The disease and the patient’s own immune system decided whether they lived or died.

A few other theories were spouted off here and there, but there was no way of knowing more until the tests were complete. Eventually, despite the terror and threat that a hemorrhagic fever might bring to their hospital, the subject moved onto more solvable cases with a brisk 'be careful'.

-||-

Bethany had waited until the cramps had gotten intolerable before telling her mother that she should probably go to the emergency room. She had never been one to complain or overreact, so her mother tended to take her seriously whenever she did (in addition to freaking the hell out because she's a mom). She had practically lived in the bathroom for the past couple of days, but both she and her family doctor had thought that she simply had some sort of nasty stomach bug. She'd been trucking through with only an anti-emetic and enough acetaminophen to pickle her liver. Pedialyte and soda crackers had been her best friends.

After she couldn't get off the bathroom floor because her stomach was doing its best impression of rolling around in a meat grinder, the high school student decided that she should probably get some help. Within minutes, she and her mom were on their way to the hospital at approximately ninety-five miles per hour (see: earlier panicked mother). It was a miracle that they weren't stopped by the cops on the way,

but apparently, luck was on their side that day, which boded well for her illness, she believed.

Making the twenty-minute drive in about twelve because her mom was obviously a street racer in a past life, they swung under the carport of the Stillwater Community Hospital ER. The frantic woman flung herself out of the car with a brisk 'stay here' and ran into the ER while Bethany just sighed. Her mom always seemed to do more panicking than she herself ever did whenever something was wrong with her. Like, yes, she felt awful and there was obviously something wrong with her, but it wasn't like she was going to die or anything. She probably had appendicitis or something along those lines.

She waited patiently for her mother to come back with a wheelchair, distracting herself with the radio in the meantime. Her stomach then decided that she needed to be sick right at that moment, but she at least managed to open the car door and heave out the side instead of all over her mother's leather seats. That was, of course, when her mom decided to come back out, pushing her into a maternal frenzy. Bethany wasn't quite sure, but she thought that her mom yelled at whoever she brought out with her. *Great*. They hadn't even been there for five minutes and that poor person was already suffering because of her. At least this was a quick bout and she was able to wipe her mouth off and sit back up.

Bethany turned her head towards her mom and saw her standing there with someone in scrubs that looked quite bemused at this lady randomly screaming at him at



eleven o'clock at night. Trying to diffuse the situation (which was much more difficult whenever she *was* the situation), she threw on a bright smile and said in a cheerful if still a bit scratchy voice, "Let's go inside, shall we? It's a bit chilly out here, isn't it?"

Immediately, her mother's focus was back on her and she was helped into the wheelchair with several placations of 'you're going to be alright, sweetie' and 'we'll find someone to get you feeling better'. Bethany was just glad that the nurse, going by the credentials on his badge, looked to have figured out his role again as he wheeled the chair inside the doors of the hospital. She hated to make other people uncomfortable. Her smile became a bit more genuine as she was brought in despite the now near-constant clench in her gut.

Ezra, the nurse, wheeled her up to the front desk to get checked in, grabbing a bucket from a safety station as he went. He appeared to be a very kind man from his demeanor, but probably was still fairly new seeing how very soft-spoken he was. Her best friend's mom was a nurse and she never took any form of crap. That lady was terrifying when she wanted to be, but also like her second mother. She had told Bethany one night over dinner that being a nurse gave you certain special powers after a number of years doing the job. One of those that was most difficult to gain, but simultaneously one of the most useful, was the ability to calm down a terrified mom. Ezra certainly did not have this power, she thought as she looked over at her mom.

Seeing how the ER at their small hospital was practically empty at 11pm on a Tuesday, she was brought to a room almost immediately. There were few places more

uncomfortable than ER waiting rooms in her opinion, and she hadn't even been in that many. They always had the same sour smell of anxious sweat and antiseptic.

Her wait in the clinic's room itself was not as short however, and gave her mom entirely too much time to panic about her condition.

"Do you want to play a game or something, Mom? I have Yahtzee on my phone. You like that game, right?" She couldn't really think of anything else to do to make her feel better.

"No, that's fine. Don't mind me." It was hard to ignore the forty-two-year-old, vibrating ball of worry in the corner. She was only fifteen, how was Bethany the one comforting her? Looking up as the door opened, to her surprise, it was the same nurse that wheeled her in earlier.

"Long time, no see," she said with a smile as he grabbed a seat on the opposite side of the room from her mother.

"Sorry about the wait. A very urgent patient just came in that needed our attention a lot more than you, which, trust me, that's a good thing on your part," Ezra said with a meek smile. "Anyway, what brings you into our fine establishment today. I heard your mother's side of the story as we were coming outside, but it's better to hear it straight from the source."

So Bethany told him about her digestive issues (mainly that her body wouldn't let that happen), her headaches, and her cramping. He did the usual nurse-ly tests with

the temperature, blood pressure, etc. etc., but stiffened suddenly and said that I reminded him of something he'd heard about the other day, and that he would be right back before heading out the door again. She thought that that was unusual, but not overly alarming.

The doctor came in soon after and introduced herself as Dr. Leducky and went through the whole song and dance routine with her all over again. At this point, Bethany just kinda wanted to curl into a ball until her cramps went away, but she was determined to keep up her strong front until she could get out of there.

The doctor left again, and another waiting period commenced. After about fifteen more minutes, it was actually Ezra that came back in with a cellphone in his hand and a mask on his face. This set off some warning bells in her head. Something had changed between the time that she had first come in and then. Her mom had just managed to calm down after the doctor came in, too.

"Um, so one of my other nursing friends in this hospital mentioned her strange patients to me the other day and your symptoms are sounding really similar. Would you mind talking to her for a little bit? She's been nursing forever and knows her stuff much better than me." Ezra shifted from foot to foot, looking like he'd really rather leave the room. Those warning bells were now at the level of tornado sirens, but her smile remained. She just nodded and took the cellphone from his now-gloved hand.

"Hello? Is this Bethany?" The voice on the other end of the line had a sweet tone to it.

“Yes, ma’am, it is. How can I help you?”

“It’s more like how can I help *you* right now actually. My name is Joyce. Can you tell me a little bit about what you’ve been going through the past couple of days?”

For seemingly the thousandth time that night, she repeated her story to the lady on the phone who simply waited quietly until she was finished before making a reassuring noise.

“Well sweetheart, I hate to tell you this, but I think you might have to come and see me for a couple of days. I’m gonna talk to your doctor in the ER and see what they think, but when Ezra called me, I was already pretty sure of what you had. I’ve been working with people with your exact same issues for the past several days. Were you around anybody who was vomiting or had flu-like symptoms?”

“Uhhh... not that I can think of? I went to a music festival last weekend, so I was around a lot of people there. Maybe one of them was sick.”

Her gut twisted as she thought of a long hospital stay, already dreading the lack of sleep and the smell sticking to absolutely everything.

“Hmm. Well, that could certainly be where you picked it up. Can you give the phone back to Ezra now? He’ll tell you what to do after I talk to your doctor.”

“Will do! Thank you, Joyce. I’ll see you soon then, I’m guessing.” Bethany handed the phone back over to Ezra, who held it like it should go in a crime scene evidence bag.

He quickly left the room with a 'I'm going to see Dr. Leducky now' and a short bath from the hand sanitizer pump just outside the room. Not exactly reassuring.

She couldn't let her mom worry more than she already was, though, so she turned a bright smile in her direction and said, "Joyce, the nurse I was just talking to, thinks that I'm gonna need some observation for a couple days to make sure I get better, but she's already seen a lot of cases like mine, so she's experienced with this. I should be better in no time!"

"A few days? Why so long if it's just a stomach bug?" Of course, that was the only part her mother had heard.

"I'm sure my new doctor upstairs will be able to tell us a lot more. If the nurse is experienced with this, the doctor must be an expert by now since they see so many more patients than nurses!"

It didn't take long after that to get them transferred upstairs, everything seeming much more rushed than when she first came in to the ER. Her mom was on the phone with one of her flaky cousins trying to get him to bring them some clothes and essential items for the next couple of days. As he was pushing her wheelchair out of the ER room, Ezra looked terribly antsy but attempted to hold a conversation with her anyways, a fact which she appreciated.

"Your official doctor has already gone home for the day, so you won't be able to meet with him until tomorrow, but I'll get you settled in the Infectious Disease ward for the night. Joyce tells me that he's a good guy, though." He seemed to say that

uncertainly, like he didn't quite believe his friend. Yet another vote of confidence for the day. Maybe luck wasn't on her side at all.

-||-

After a night of restless sleep interrupted by too many trips to the bathroom (which were always ordeals since she had to call the nurse to help her get back and forth), Bethany was ready to talk to a shaman or a mystic if they would stop her digestive issues. Thankfully, she didn't get that far before her doctor came instead.

He peeked his head in through the door, probably trying to see if she was awake, before walking into the room. He was an average-sized man with dark hair and skin and seemed very young for a doctor, definitely younger than any other doctor that she'd had before. He didn't walk like a man that had a lot of confidence in himself. He looked like he used the phrase 'fake it 'til you make it' as a life motto instead of a temporary mantra. She thought she understood why Ezra looked so uncertain the night before. Nevertheless, she smiled at him as he came in, preparing to give him a chance.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Nadim. I'll be taking care of you during your stay with us."

What was this place? A hotel?

"If you should have any questions, feel free to ask."

She was pretty sure that he had pulled that directly from a hotel service handbook.

“I’m going to review the symptoms that you talked about with Dr. Leducky now, and you can tell me if everything sounds good or if we need to adjust anything. You can interrupt as needed.”

She could tell that this guy felt really uncomfortable, probably because she was a teenager and her mother was still passed out on the sofa bed across the room. He kept glancing back and forth between her mother and herself like he was wondering if he should wake her for this.

“Well then...we’ll start with the medical history. You’re a fifteen-year-old female with a history of celiac disease and an allergy to morphine, correct?”

“Well, I hope so. Otherwise, somebody has been lying to me.” She tried to make the rather stiff man crack a smile to some success. It was really more of a grimace, but she was a determined girl. She could work with that.

“Anything else I should know about your history that you didn’t tell the people downstairs?”

“Well, I’m historically pretty bad at math, but apart from that, not really.” At his raised eyebrow, she decided that jokes probably weren’t the way to go with this guy.

“So, I’m sure you’re well and tired of going over your symptoms by now, but could you do it one more time for me? You might mention something that rings a bell for me that the others didn’t register.”

Bethany internally sighed but complied with his wishes. If she was willing to hire a mystic, surely, she can repeat her symptoms approximately one thousand times in a row. “Well, I’ve been throwing up and had the runs for about a week now. I have horrible cramping in my stomach, and this morning I woke up with a headache. My mom and I just thought that it was a stomach bug for a while but those usually don’t last this long so when the cramps got bad enough, we came in.” Bethany gestured to her mother in the corner of the room, who was listening intently with hope in her eyes now that the doctor was here.

“Alright, well we have to run some tests on your blood and a couple other things that might be a bit less comfortable, but I’ll let you know ahead of time. Joyce will be your nurse for the day in case she hasn’t already told you, but I’ll get her in here to do your tests in a bit.”

His words seemed very doctorly and professional, but his body language screamed of uncertainty and stress. Nurse Joyce had mentioned that there were others with her same symptoms that they were working with, so she was guessing that this was actually a pretty big problem. Dr. Nadim looked so young. He was probably pretty new and had something thrown on his plate that he couldn’t figure out quite yet, which was most likely freaking him out. Poor guy. He looked like he could use a hug, but seeing



how she apparently had some sort of infectious disease, she really shouldn't offer. Not exactly professional either, she supposed. She would do what she was able to anyway from her place as a patient.

She beamed at him and said with complete confidence in her voice, "I have total faith in you, Dr. Nadim. I'm sure I'll be better in no time."

There it was, she internally cheered. A smile, weak though it was, had finally been brought to the man's face. It made her feel better already.

-||-

Three days later, his patient looked at him in fear as she clutched her stomach.

"It's only getting worse. The cramps and this damn headache are tearing me apart. These pain meds aren't working at all anymore," Bethany gritted out through her teeth. She was alone in the room at that moment, her mother having stepped out to restock their necessities. That was probably the only reason that Bethany was complaining at all, Ari figured. Over the past week that the girl had been here, the doctor hadn't seen Bethany appear scared at all, always reassuring her mother that she would be fine and that this sign and that treatment were good news, despite her progressive decline.

The doctor attempted to respond, "We could give you something stronger..."

Bethany seemed to quiet some. "I don't want to be knocked out. I don't want to spend my time sleeping."

She paused before glancing up at him with much calmer eyes and a broken smile on her face. Her voice was weak. "This is going to kill me, and I refuse to *waste* my time sleeping," the girl stated plainly. "What use is sleep when you're gonna be dead tomorrow anyway?"

Her smile never even quivered as she talked, but when it was clear that her doctor was struck speechless, she turned her face away, too weak to do more. It was clearly a signal that she wanted him to leave the room.

Ari stood there stunned and stuttered out, "I'll just have Nurse Joyce get your meds then. We have... uh... a drug that I think might make the pain a little less. It shouldn't make you sleep... um... unless you want to of course." He laughed nervously. "Sleep is good for healing after all!" How ironic that the laugh she had been trying to pull from him this whole time was to come out then.

When he heard no reply, he began to edge out of the room, creeping as silently as possible for some reason he couldn't name. He couldn't even breathe as the air had turned to stone around him while he was focused on his patient.

He had just been given a real proclamation of death, he was certain. During his residency, he'd been told that patients often knew when death was coming for them, but it was seldom a frightening process. They often proclaimed to see loved ones that had died or hear the voices of those with whom they have unfinished business. He

didn't think he would ever know for sure why this happened unless it happened to him eventually, but he postulated that it was either the brain trying to ease its own passage into death or it's whatever existence that comes next bleeding into this one. Even at his age, Ari still wasn't sure where he sat with the whole 'afterlife' thing. It's like dying people existed in a gray area of *being*, living neither here nor all the way there, the lines blurring, and most expected deaths that he had seen had been peaceful. Once they had gotten to the active dying stage, people had generally accepted the fact that they were finished and crossed that line with an open mind. Bethany, on the other hand, had seemed to feel like death was coming for her in the form of hellhounds waiting to rip her from her body by force. She was terrified, not at ease. That cheerful girl, so bright even in the midst of an illness that causes constant pain and humiliation, lay dead inside already, having given up.

Ari turned around and fled his patient's room as soon as he hit the door, needing to leave as much as Bethany wanted him gone. Walking swiftly down the halls, past the nursing station, catching the attention of almost everyone there by throwing down the girl's chart on the counter as he passed, he went out into the main entrance of the hospital. He sat down on one of the benches just outside of the main doors and just *existed* for a bit. He had work to do. He couldn't just sit here, slacking off on his responsibilities. He shouldn't even be out here now, honestly. Dr. Nadim had a consultation in less than 30 minutes with another set of parents that were convinced their son had the same infection that had destroyed Bethany, their 10-month old son.

Ari, on the other hand, needed a break after looking into the eyes of a reaper.

*That girl will be dead by tomorrow, and I don't think there is anything I can do about it.*

He still didn't know what the infection even was. He'd tried a range of antibiotics, antiparasitics, antifungals, and a host of other medicines which really only made his patients' symptoms feel worse. Heavy fever reducers only barely kept them below delirious. They were being kept hydrated and nourished intravenously because anything consumed by mouth would come straight back up violently. Even with empty stomachs, they spent their days coughing up bile and soiling their sheets. After about a week of these initial symptoms, blood would begin to leak from every orifice, a truly ghastly sight, and their circulation would begin to fail as they lost fluids too fast for the IVs to keep up.

Anyone would be beyond miserable, but Bethany had stayed hopeful. Sitting there for days on end, she had a smile for everyone who came into her room. Her blinds were always open and it seemed that even in the nighttime her room was one of the brightest. She had made him smile when he had been stressed out beyond belief, a feat that usually only Beau, his boyfriend, could manage. Now, however, her light had drained out, leaving only an omen of death in her place. Her smile was left cragged and, if he was honest with himself, terrifying. Her light at the end of the tunnel for him turned out to be a train. He had never felt so helpless in his life.

With that thought, Ari's heart tore jaggedly in his chest. With the others' deaths, there was a certain light in them still. They knew they would be okay in the end, even if they were scared. They still had love and life in their demeanors, but Bethany conveyed

such a sense of desolation that he couldn't breathe in her presence. All he could smell then was the cloying stench of decay. He bent over and harshly gasped, the flowers around him becoming blurry, and the bright colors blended together.

How unfair it was that the flowers remained so cheery while everything was wilting around him. Then again, he thought, it wouldn't be long until these flowers die too. Suddenly, he felt bile racing up his throat and, having nowhere else to go but also slightly out of spite, he emptied his stomach out into the flowerbed. Not so cheery anymore, he supposed, as he wiped his mouth off with his hand and spat into the remaining patch of flowers that he had missed the first time.

He made it to his meeting in plenty of time.

-||-

Ari came home that night to a vase of carnations out for him on the dinner table, with a note lying next to it.

*I know that you're having a rough time at work right now. You don't always have to be the Superman for everyone (even though you're always a Superman to me!) I love you!*

*With all the love that can come out of one person,*

*Your entirely too sentimental boyfriend*

*P.S. I made you dinner. It's in the red-lidded Tupperware in the fridge. I did my best.*

There was a little slash-faced smiley at the end of the letter, staring at him in all of its 'meh-ness'. Ari tried to feel grateful, but the flowers on the table were staring at him, these ones even more dead than the ones from the hospital. He left them and walked over to the kitchen, pulling out the packed-up spaghetti and garlic bread, and stuck them both in the microwave, utterly not caring that the bread would get dry, maybe even catch fire. He sat there staring intently at the microwave, pointedly only thinking about the slowly rotating spaghetti and slightly jumping bread. He was pretty sure it wasn't supposed to do that, but again, he didn't care much at the moment. He just felt utterly emptied out. He figured the food might help with that. Pulling the Tupperware out before the timer went off so as to not wake Beau, he made his way over to the living room, giving the vase a wide berth. He sat on the couch and shoveled the lukewarm spaghetti and garlic bread that would be right at home as a rock on the lip of a volcano into his mouth, contemplating if throwing it into the fires of Mordor would help soften it a bit. He tried not to think about too much else.

Once that business was dealt with, he went to the bathroom and stripped off the scrubs that always smelled just a bit like formalin no matter how many times he had washed them since an accident with a fetal pig four years ago. It was fitting that he had worn those particular ones that day since they smelled like death. Finally stepping into the shower, Ari let the cold water pour over him, washing the feel of sickness from his body.

This was his favorite nightly ritual. Not only did he get to wash the ever-present smell of 'hospital' off, but it gave him his only consistent piece of alone time throughout the entire day. He was always surrounded by people. From his partner getting ready in the morning to his daily commute on the subway being forced to touch more people than must be sanitary, not to mention the whole day at work bombarded by people that needed things from him, he couldn't ever catch his breath.

There was always this tension in him whenever another person was around, even his partner. It wasn't like he was pretending to be something he wasn't, he'd moved past that during high school, but he was very careful to only show certain parts of himself to the different categories of people in his life. He wasn't a gay man at work due to the fact that people were still prejudiced, and he refused to risk someone's life because they refuse treatment based on his sexuality. With his patients, he was not a human being that had the possibility of making mistakes. He couldn't be The Doctor at home because, despite Beau's attempts at showing how comfortable he was hearing about death and sickness all the time from work, frankly, he's full of shit. He was too bright of a character to be tainted with the crap he dealt with from day to day (pun not intended).

Beau didn't quite have the shining quality that Bethany radiated; he didn't immediately catch everyone's attention as he walked in a room, but the more time someone spent with him, the more one felt this gentle warmth that seemed to come straight from their own chest.

Beau made people feel brighter on their own somehow and Ari had never been able to find out how he did it. Although, the doctor supposed that perhaps everyone might not feel the same way he did around Beau. He was rather biased. Either way, Ari believed that special education was really the best possible route that Beau could have taken with his life. His love for children and his ability to nurture joy in people's lives built a foundation of love and learning in 'his' kids' lives. It was really the best route Beau could have taken for the world's sake...which might be a bit dramatic, but his partner was a beautiful soul, and he would defend that to his dying day.

The cold water of the shower, the stresses of the day, and the lack of sleep for about the past ten years began to create a shake somewhere deep in his chest, so he turned off the water and stepped out. Not quite ready to join his warm partner yet in bed despite his chill, Ari grabbed his towel, one lovingly chosen by Beau covered in the main symbol of his favorite fantasy book series, wrapped it around himself, and proceeded to sit down on the rug right outside the shower, not really having the motivation to move over to the tub in order to sit on the lip.

Looking at the watch that often reminded him that he was supposed to be a responsible adult, he realized that it was well past two in the morning. Groaning at the thought of his five o'clock wake-up, he let his head fall back onto the glass shower door.



Coming out of sleep felt like waking from a short death, Ari thought, but certainly, that wasn't quite fair. Dying probably wouldn't be quite as painful. His consciousness refused to come out of the hole it'd been left in when he had apparently fallen asleep, and he drifted through the miasma holding his mind until he decided that, wherever he was, it hurt too bad to stay there while awake. Semi-awake. Either way, by the sheer force of will taught to him by countless, cram-session-induced late nights, he dragged his consciousness into the world and mentally slapped it around a little to wake himself up.

He then realized why his body ached all over. He'd never made it to bed the night before and had fallen asleep against the shower door with his back propped up and his neck bent in a position that would frighten the girl from *The Exorcist*. Everything from the hips down was entirely numb from what he assumed was several pinched nerves and blood vessels. He honestly didn't want to even think about moving as the pain he was already in now would exponentially intensify once he did, but the ever-present voice of his med school professors calmly explained to him the dangers of long-term depression of circulation and brought up at least twenty things that could be permanently damaged if he didn't move.

It's pretty standard fare for med students and residents to become extremely paranoid that they suddenly have every single illness in existence once they begin to learn about them, and Ari had been no exception. If anything, he had caught a much more severe case of paranoia than most that had only just begun to taper off over the years since med school. Every time nausea or a migraine would strike him, a list of life-

threatening diseases would be created in his head, like his own personal WebMD telling him that he's obviously going to die, except for the fact that his was more accurate, and thus, more believable.

With the thought that he didn't want to die on his bathroom floor and have Beau walk in on that, Ari made himself move, snap, crackling, and popping the whole way up. He certainly wasn't one of those college students that could lie in front of the toilet all night after a party and wake up with no repercussions anymore, not that he'd been that kind of college student anyhow. He had been a pre-med in college. They have no fun. He was pretty sure it's in the fine print of the contract you sign to sell your soul to the profession. Not to mention his double science major and all the 'extracurricular' activities that were required of him if he'd wanted to get into medical school. Those 'optional' clubs had absorbed all his time and energy throughout college with countless hours of volunteer work that were barely relevant to medicine, endless meetings with ignorant philosophical discussions, and numberless socials where children put on their Mommy's or Daddy's shoes and paraded around pretending to network. He had found it tedious to the extreme, but it had all been a means to an end, the wonderful end of being a Doctor, and here he now was, sleeping on the bathroom floor because he was too tired and defeated to walk ten steps to his bed. Not exactly the sparkling lifestyle he had worked for all those years.

Looking at his ridiculously expensive watch that still only managed to tell him the time, he realized that he still had an hour left before he was officially supposed to 'wake up', and, since he knew he wouldn't be able to fall asleep again in that amount of time,

he decided to just get up now. Part of him was pleased. He had managed to steal some time away from the greedy, screeching world around him before the sun came up, and now, it was his to do with as he pleased. Creeping past the bed where his love still slept starfished out on the bed, he came into the kitchen and opened the pantry to search for the tea of the morning. Beau had pledged fealty to the gods of coffee and eagerly tried to convert everyone around him to his religion, but Ari was firmly devoted to the Tea Goddess. Tea was soothing to the soul in a way that coffee couldn't touch, and, on top of that, coffee left him jittery and vaguely nauseous.

Ari honestly loved the rituals involved with tea-making. He finally decided on a full-bodied Assam, needing the caffeine this morning, and measured out an exact amount into the infuser while waiting for the water to heat. He waited for the bubbles to bloom in the bottom of the pan, signaling their desire to escape off into the atmosphere. He grabbed the water off the stove right before it was about to boil in earnest and slowly poured the water over the tea leaves while leaning over to be at eye level. This was better than meditation to him. The smell of the black tea overlaid with hints of vanilla began to sneak into the air as the tea infused, the rich color swirling out into the water in eddies as thermodynamics took over, the quiet in the apartment as everything was waiting to become alive again as the day started. Those three and a half minutes while the tea steeped were easily the most relaxed moments of his entire day.

It was almost disappointing to set the infuser on top of his travel mug and let the peace he had found drain out with the tea, but then he could drink the tea, so he figured he'd be alright. Ari then proceeded to 'ruin it' with enough sugar to make a six-

year-old cringe. He saw diabetic patients daily and partially resented them for making every aspect of his job more difficult. He knew exactly how people got diabetes; it was practically its own class in medical school, but it was one thing to know the science of something, and a whole other thing to actually live your life according to the science. He had truly improved his diet quite a bit since he'd moved in with Beau. The giant tyrant had ravaged his pantry after the move and thrown out the ramen, the granola bars, the white bread, and even, to his poor soul's dismay, his trail mix. Most of his meals went in the trash with the quick, packaged snacks.

It was always so easy to just run out the door holding a couple snack bars in his hand without any muss or fuss, but Beau had none of that. Who would have thought that most of his lethargy in med school was from subsisting on almost nothing but carbs? Certainly, not a doctor. Doctors really tended to have some of the worst habits when it comes to taking care of themselves. Who, truly, had the willpower to cook a nutritious meal after working for thirty-six hours straight? The only exercise he got on a regular basis was running around the hospital trying to find a nurse to take care of something for him. His sleeping habits alternated between thirty minutes and fourteen hours a night. However, he figured that he'd be old enough to retire by the time his poor health choices catch up to him, so until it was time to pay his dues, he'd continue to eat like a college student discovering the dollar store for the first time...as long as Beau couldn't see him anyway.

Realizing he'd spent more than half his alone time already, he downed the rest of his tea before racing to the laundry room to find his secret stash. In the cabinet with

the laundry detergent, where Beau would never think to look because he never does his own laundry, was the trail mix he'd bought one day while his boyfriend was gone. It was his guilty pleasure, and while Beau was completely for splurging on junk food occasionally, he certainly would not approve of the five-pound bag he munched out of whenever possible, and it spared him the disappointed look. Ari honestly wished that Beau would just get mad about things, but no, the gentle giant would simply look at him as if he murdered a puppy with a pitchfork and, suddenly, Ari would feel like human garbage. So he ate his trail mix in secret.

Sneaking back into bed before their alarm went off, Ari waited for the real day to begin. He'd had his reprieve from the world, but now it was waiting for the sound of a trashy pop song (that was Beau's favorite about five years ago that they had yet to change) to bombard him with responsibility.

-||-

Bethany had been lying in that hospital bed for four days, and she knew by then that she would never leave it. Not alive anyways. She'd been spitting up blood all morning and could barely breathe for all the fluid in her lungs. They'd put her on oxygen the night before, but she kept getting nosebleeds that would clog the tubing stretched across her face. She kept telling herself that she wasn't one to complain unless she was

dying, but, seeing how she was, she thought it appropriate to whine until they allowed her to remove it. It's not like it would do much good by the end of the day.

She had learned about Kübler-Ross's five stages of dying in her psychology class just a couple months ago. Yesterday, she had obviously been going through the anger stage as she cut at her doctor. She knew that she had hurt him, was hurting everyone around her, but couldn't bring herself to stop. She supposed she was in the depressive stage now. If she still had the breath for it, she would laugh at how surreal that was. Most of her friends from school are sitting in class right this minute, completely unaware that they were about to lose a friend. They just thought that she had some extended stomach bug. Her mother thought it best not to tell them otherwise so that she could have some peace here to recover. Just two weeks ago, she was just sitting in class too, excited about her solo in the upcoming Christmas concert and blushing through every interaction with Eric, her chemistry partner, long-time friend, and crush. She'd never even imagined that something like this could happen to her, but then again, no one ever does.

Her mother, always in her spot in the corner, was starting to realize what was happening, Bethany thought. She hadn't spoken much all morning and wouldn't look at her for longer than a second or two. Every time Bethany would have to use the spit tray to spit out more blood or add to the growing pile of bloody tissues in the trashcan next to the bed Bethany would see her mom flinch horribly while keeping her face firmly turned towards the window, watching her in the reflection.

Bethany thought that she was ready to go to sleep now.

Soon, Dr. Nadim came through the door for his morning rounds. The man looked as exhausted as she felt, and she was dying. He was holding his body stiffly like he had gotten about thirty years older since their first meeting.

His voice shattered the silence of the room, triggering another flinch from her mother as he spoke, "How are we feeling today, Ms. Wittman?" The obviously fake cheery voice was grating on Bethany today. She wondered if this was what other people felt around her previously sunny attitude. If so, then it was a wonder that she had had any friends at all.

"Not too well, Doctor. I changed my mind; I want those stronger painkillers you mentioned yesterday." Her breathing grew harsher with each word. Her mother's head whipped around at her request, staring at her daughter desperately as she struggled.

Dr. Nadim on the other hand, took on a resigned look, like he had been expecting it. Only someone unreasonable, like her mother currently, would expect a teenager to stare death in the face all the way until the end.

"I can certainly have Joyce get that for you. What about your symptoms? How are-"

"I would really prefer if you got them for me now, if you don't mind."

The doctor looked shocked, not expecting her to be impolite. Who knew how long it would take if she didn't push him though? Hospitals are slow with that kind of thing.

"Alright, well I'll call her right now, then. We should have a few boluses prepared already while we wait for the pharmacy to get the IV bag. I'll have her grab them."

The doctor stepped out of the room for a second to call down the hallway to her nurse. The easy pacing of Joyce's shoes down the hallway followed the voice, but for Bethany, the tapping of the footsteps was the sound of her executioner coming closer. There was a short, whispered conversation just out of her hearing, but it sounded like Joyce was against what she was asking for. Bethany would fight for it though if she had to. She couldn't take this. She just wanted to be sleeping.

"Joyce will be back in a second. She went to go grab your medication." He gave her an awkward smile, all traces of the earlier resignation gone. He looked happy to be doing something to help her. "Now about your symptoms--"

"I've been spitting up blood all morning and my nose has occasional bleeding. The cramps are still horrible, my head is splitting apart and I can't breathe," she gasped out. Just this much talking had already used up all her energy. She knew that he wouldn't let her sleep until after she'd told him though, so she pushed through.

Joyce came back shortly, with red rimming her eyes. She understood what Bethany was asking for too. "I put in the order into the pharmacy for you. They said it would be ready in an hour. Are you sure you don't want to wait until then?"



Joyce was a nice lady. Bethany knew what she was trying to do for her, and she knew the nurse meant well, but she was done.

“No, that’s fine. You can give it to me now.” Her mother began to quietly sob in the corner, her shaking shoulders the only indicator to her pain.

Joyce hesitated at her IV pump while Dr. Nadim explained the medication.

“This drug will probably make you take a good nap, but it’s extraordinarily effective. You shouldn’t feel a thing. The normal side effects include dizziness and nausea, but we’ve been dealing with that already, so I don’t think there will be much of an increase. I don’t think we need to worry about you driving on this, so that should cover everything. Does that sound alright? Mrs. Wittman?” If his smile looked any more strained than it would probably crack his face. The rising tension in the room was awful.

“Yes, sounds good. Right, Mom?” There was a croak of a yes from the corner.

Joyce spoke up then, “This will go directly into your bloodstream, so you’ll probably have about ten minutes before you need to sleep.” She seemed weary.

Bethany took the warning for what it was. “Thank you, Joyce.” The unsaid *for everything* hopefully understood. She turned to her doctor, too. “And thank you, Dr. Nadim.” She hoped they wouldn’t get too affected by her death. She’d hate to just leave pain behind her. Although, maybe all the pain in her body right now had to go somewhere. It’s just translated out into everyone close to her like the conservation of energy.

"I hope this helps." That was the last thing she heard her doctor say as they walked out the door after the injection.

Silence ruled the room once again apart from the occasional snuffle from her mom until the normally brash woman pulled her chair closer to her bedside and gently grabbed onto her hand. Her mom's thumb rubbed gently across her palm, wary of the tubes running into the back.

"Momma, I'm gonna get some sleep now, okay?"

"I'll be here when you wake up, baby. I'll be here the whole time." Her mom was trying desperately to keep in one piece, she could tell.

Bethany just smiled at her, at her eternal hope. "Goodbye, Momma."

"You mean goodnight, right? It's good night." She cracked, her hand clasping tighter and tighter onto her hand, like she could squeeze the drug out.

"No, Momma, I don't," She could feel her consciousness fading. She looked at her mom's face, unwilling to close her eyes now until she had to. "I love you."

Her only answer was sobs.

-||-

Excerpt from the journal of Ari Nadir

Case: Bethany Wittman

Sex: F      Age: 15

History: Celiac, Morphine ALL

Symptoms: vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramping, fever, *hematemesis*,  
*epistaxis*, *depression*

Dx: Unknown.

Tx: ABX, IV fluids, monitoring, *fentanyl max dose*, *methadone max dose*

*Cause of death: Heart failure due to hypovolemic shock*

*Time of Death: 1625 on 11/20/2006*

Case: Lucas Farmer

Sex: M      Age: 10 months

History: None

Symptoms: Vomiting, diarrhea, severe fever, colic

Dx: Unknown

Tx: ABX, IV fluids, monitoring

-||-

Ari came home that evening actually in time for dinner for once, hearing Beau puttering around in the kitchen.

One sneaky investigation later, and he discovered his massive six foot six boyfriend in the bright yellow ducky apron they won in last year's annual white elephant exchange hosted by Beau's family. He'd thought that it was immediately thrown in their donation pile the minute they got home, but apparently, he was incorrect. It looked like he was making some sort of Mediterranean dish if the boiling pasta and the feta cheese on the counter was any indicator.

Slinking behind him, Ari raised his voice, "Where did you even find that atrocious apron again?"

Beau screeched and brandished his weapon towards the doctor, clutching the counter behind him, "Oh mother of God, you freaking ninja! I almost bludgeoned you!" He grabbed his chest and heaved for breath as he comes down from his fright.

"With a cooking spoon? I'm truly shaking in my ergonomic sneakers." Ari just smirked at him, leaning against the counter at Beau's side.

The teacher just looked at him and with a haughty sniff said, "I'll have you know that my mother's wooden spoon was feared across the whole county when I was a child! Never underestimate a patented Whitfield spoon smack. I'm pretty sure my skull is still dented from the time my brother and I thought it was a good idea to go out and

get drunk in the bank parking lot off Grandfather's nice scotch in the middle of the night." Beau shuddered at the night, rubbing the back of his head in remembered pain.

"You know, I really think that that explains a lot, dearest" Ari teased, a smile wiping away the imprint that the stress of the day had left on his face. Beau only stuck his tongue out, too much like the children he spent so much time around.

"What are you making now?" Ari asked, wanting only to wrap his arms around Beau's waist but knowing that the hospital smell still clung to him. His boyfriend denied it, but he knew that the teacher associated the odor with death and negativity, which was really not that inaccurate with the day that he had had. Ari usually tried to shower as soon as he got home to make his boyfriend more comfortable. It was an unspoken arrangement between them, but he could tell that Beau appreciated it.

"Uhhh...it's a quintessential Beau concoction. A Greek chicken pasta dish...thing," he sighs, "I'm pretty sure it'll turn out tasty, but there's always pizza if it explodes or something." Beau looked dubiously at the ingredients he had set out. "You have enough time to shower if you'd like before dinner anyway. I still haven't started the chicken."

Ari nodded and went off to the bathroom, knowing it would relax them both once he was clean. Throughout his shower, the emotions of the day began to creep back into his mind, feeling like thick, black ropes wrapped around his limbs trying to drag him down to the shower floor where he would probably sit for the next several years until all his problems had gone away. The guilt and anxiety over Bethany's death and the others that were still suffering were quickly becoming overwhelming. He felt so useless. What

was the point of the years of agony and stress he went through for training if he couldn't keep any of his patients alive, much less actually figure out how to solve their problem. It was obvious to him and anyone with a brain that they were suffering from the same thing, but his usual databases were failing him and his colleagues even more so. Nothing he was doing was working and he felt more and more useless with every day and every patient that passed.

The heat of the shower became stifling and a black fuzz began to encroach on his vision. When one of his knees gave out, Ari panicked and flung himself out of the stall, suds still on his body. 'Why is it always the shower lately? I can't even wash myself like a normal human being.'

Sitting down on the toilet seat lid, he grabbed a towel and wiped off the worst of the bubbles and attempted to control his breathing and his thoughts now that he was out of the heat. Once he felt like he had grabbed most of the panic and shoved it into his mental 'work' box, he focused on his appearance so Beau wouldn't worry. He didn't like talking to his boyfriend about the horrible things he saw doing his work anyway. Beau didn't need to hear about a dead teenager and her mourning mother. The woman's voice rang in his ears though on a loop. Her wrenching sobs heard from down the corridor. Her placating words as she tried to comfort *him* by saying that she *understood* and that he had *done the best that he could do* like he was some sort of competent physician.

Firmly putting the memories away, Ari threw on a pair of sweatpants and an old t-shirt from college before going out to see if dinner was finished.

-||-

A homey scene awaited him in the dining room. The smell of garlic and other spices was heady in the air as Beau brought a delicious-looking conglomeration of food to the table where the placemats were already out. He'll never fully understand the purpose of having placemats. They only get dirty and have to be washed after almost every meal because for all Beau's preaching about proper manners, the man can't help but make some kind of mess every time he eats. However, they made his Ikea-loving monster of a partner happy, so they have placemats. The table had their only two candles flickering away, and the doctor swore he could palpate his affection for the other man in his chest.

"Anything I can do to help?" Ari asked as he walked towards the kitchen.

"You can sit your cute butt down and not come within two feet of my damn kitchen," the teacher replied cheekily, "We both know you're liable to catch something on fire just by breathing in there."

“Excuse you, you know I spent god knows how many semesters in chemistry labs where they let me cook things over fires much hotter than anything in that kitchen? They gave me dangerous chemicals and everything.”

“Yes dear, and it’s a wonder everyone involved is still alive after that.”

“For God’s sake, I’m a doctor! I’m smart enough not to automatically kill everyone in the immediate vicinity every time I venture into a kitchen,” Ari grumbled, trying to remember the last time he had done anything remotely successful involving food. For anything that required a more caring touch than a microwave, it had been a while to put it lightly.

“Yes, you are a doctor, and I think that the best way that you can *do no harm* right now is by staying the hell away from my kitchen. You can do the washing up later.” Beau brought the accompanying salad over to the table and sat down, looking expectantly between Ari and the wine glasses he had set out earlier.

Ari didn’t want to admit that Beau was right, but he also vividly remembered the trashcan fire he had accidentally set one time in chem lab that had the whole science building evacuating, so he kept his mouth shut (but rolled his eyes for pride’s sake) and went to grab a bottle of wine from the alcohol cabinet by the breakfast bar.

“Red please tonight, if you would sweetheart!” Beau called out beatifically.

“Little shit,” he mumbles under his breath about the giant man-child sitting at his table, picking out a nice Cabernet and going back to pour both Beau and himself a glass.



They ate their admittedly delicious dinner in amicable silence, both too focused on shoveling the concoction into their mouths as fast as they could without needing the Heimlich. Whatever else could be said about Beau's cheekiness, he was a damn good cook when he put in the effort.

-||-

After the loathsome task of cleaning the dishes was complete, Ari joined his partner in the living room to watch TV while they both wound down from the day. Even with the normally relaxing activity, Ari was still on edge, a lingering tension remaining somewhere between his spine and his lungs. It felt like a parasite lying dormant in his chest, ready to force its head through his rib cage at the wrong provocation. For now though, it was stuck as simmering anxiety, making him fidget and slightly nauseous.

Some serial killer documentary was on in the background, Beau's choice since it was Wednesday, and it was just another dichotomous thing about that man, Ari knew and loved. Perhaps you have to enjoy a bit of sadism to teach middle school children, special education or not. Honestly, when kids were between the ages of nine and fourteen, Ari had never learned how to deal with them. As patients, they were impossible. They never comply to his advice and are almost always angry and bratty due to the fact that they don't feel well when they come in to see him.

Looking towards the bedroom however, Ari realized that perhaps he really just needed to go to sleep and hope that tomorrow wasn't as draining as today, not that he had much hope for that with the way that his patients were faring. Even if he would need something extra to shut his brain down, he thought he should at least try to go to bed. One goodnight kiss later (with the unnerving backdrop of decapitation and cannibalism) and Ari left for bed with an extra-strength nightcap in his hand.

Thirty minutes later, the doctor was not only still awake, he was also slightly woozy. His head had felt like a tangled mess of cross-firing wires since Bethany coded the first time that morning. The alcohol had only made it more volatile. He couldn't lie still but felt too off to get up and do anything about it.

Suddenly, Ari heard the distinct noise of a person scrambling and the crash of something hitting the floor out in the living room, quickly followed by the sounds of retching.

"Beau?" he mumbled, trying to swing his legs off the bed. He needed to get to his boyfriend. Some part of him had reared its head, whispering about the common first symptom.

"Beau?! Is everything okay?" Of course things weren't okay. What was he thinking? The man was throwing up in... was that his fern? Of course it was his fern. That was the one thing he *could* keep alive lately. Why was it...his vomit was red. Why was it red? Bloody emesis was further down the path of that disease, wasn't it? Fuck if he

knew at this point though. He couldn't understand it well enough to keep Bethany or any of the others alive so far, so who's to say that he has any of it right.

The doctor stumbled over to Beau but flinched away before he could touch him. The poor man was still heaving (into his plant his mind helpfully supplied).

It struck him at that point that Beau was going to die. Literally the only certain thing in his life was going to leave him and he would be truly alone. Also, he thought, Beau was going to die not because of some freak accident or act of God, but because he was a failure as a doctor and as a healer. Doctors are supposed to relieve suffering, but at this rate, Ari might as well just euthanize all his patients (including Beau now it seemed) because that would be so much easier than what they would go through otherwise, than what he saw Bethany go through. Surely it was cruel and inhumane to let that happen to someone else.

Ari could feel a hysterical laugh building in the back of his throat as his breathing grew frantic. The smell of the vomit permeated throughout the room and he could sense the stench settling into every fabric in the surrounding area. The parasite decided that right then was a good time to wrap around his lungs, constricting and scraping everything raw until every breath had broken glass dragging across his lung's pleural lining. His eye caught on a slow flow of red seeping out of the bottom of the planer and his vision tunneled. This was his scarlet ibis, his omen. He doesn't remember how, but the carpet ended up clenched in his fists. Distantly, above the static, he wondered if he had fallen or if something else had occurred that he couldn't explain.

A hand touched him and he heard a shout pierce through the air. He wondered where it came from before an ache in his throat notified him that it was likely his own. He couldn't stop staring, transfixed on the little stream of red coming from the bottom of the planter. It took up his whole vision and it seemed like it was the only thing that really had meaning in his world right then. He'd come to understand what bloody vomit meant in his reality. It was the red cross on the tree preparing to be cut down. That hysterical laugh escaped then and something out of the corner of his vision flinched back. Ari didn't blame it, honestly. He would get away from the sound too if he could, if only it wasn't coming from himself. The doctor was sure he must sound demented, but the ringing in his ears was too loud to really hear it.

Something began to dig into his face then as his gaze was torn from the planter with its steady drip of red red red red red. He was forced to look at Beau, his line of sight only shifting onto the drips of red slowly moving down his chin. Vaguely, he thought that this was a worse sight than staring at the (poor) fucking plant. Hardly helpful.

Sound began to filter back into his reality once he realized that the lips attached to the chin he was staring at were moving rather frantically. Beau was saying his name repeatedly in a panic, which made sense to Ari seeing how he was going to die. Ari thought that he would panic in that situation too, but one never really knows how they're going to react until they're actively dying.

The doctor's hand was drawn into Beau's chest right over the ephemeral heart beat thudding away. Some part of him registered that he must not be too far along with

the infection or else it would probably be quite bradycardic, not pounding at over 140 bpm. That was good at least. He wanted some more time with him.

“-athe with me, sweetheart. Come on! Feel my breaths through my chest and follow the rhythm. Deep breath in! Just focus on me, Ari.” Ari was focusing on him. That was the problem.

Realizing that he hadn’t taken a breath in quite a while, he fought against the coils wrapped around his lungs and gasped in a first breath, quickly sending him into another round of hyperventilation.

“That’s a start, but you’ve got to follow me, love. You’re having a panic attack. Breathe *with* me.”

That was ridiculous, Ari thought in the recently rebooted portion of his brain. He didn’t get panic attacks. The simple explanation to all of this was that he was being attacked by a giant parasite in his chest. That shouldn’t be too difficult to understand.

His fingers and toes began to tingle, like little sparks of light stabbing into his extremities. Respiratory alkalosis, his brain helpfully supplied, his inner college physiology professor, Dr. Stone, piping in at the most inconvenient times. He didn’t particularly want to think about anything medical at the moment. He didn’t really want to think about anything at all. It would be much more convenient if he just passed out. Maybe it would work like a computer, and he could just turn it off and back on again to see if that fixed the issue. Maybe Beau wouldn’t be dying when he woke up again.

At that, he could feel his chest constricting once again and blackness began to encroach on the outskirts of his vision. He thought that he might die before Beau does and that would be easier anyways. With a hand grasping his chin, his eyes were forced up to meet Beau's. The cornflower blue eyes slowly gathered his attention away from the battlefield that was his brain.

Now that he had eye contact, the special ed teacher's voice began to filter back into his awareness. He was trying so hard to coach Ari back into a better place. He loves this man so much. He probably has to deal with things like this all the time at school. Ari doesn't begrudge him the responsibility.

With a hand on Beau's chest feeling his (temporary, transient) breathing, Ari was finally able to slow his own down to a sustainable rhythm. Every part of him begins to sag into the carpet as he comes down from the panic. Sensing that the worst had passed, Beau lowered his voice and gently asked, "Can I hold you? I mean I know I did just get sick, but I think you need a hug more than I need to wash my mouth out at the moment."

Ari nodded, disease transmission be damned. He couldn't care less about the possibility of contracting that (soul-sucking, life-destroying) disease right then. Fuck PPE. He was probably the one who gave this cursed thing to the teacher anyways.

Beau's arms came around him and Ari could smell the vomit on him, but before his mind could spiral into anxiety and despair again, Ari just tucked his head into his

partner's chest and leaned into him, breathing through his mouth all the while. That was better.

"I think we're both a bit exhausted now," Beau said in a scratchy voice, strained by the earlier burn and subsequent yelling. "Why don't we both try to get some sleep now." It didn't really sound like a question.

"Later, you can tell me what the hell just caused one of the worst panic attacks I've ever seen in more than ten years of working with special needs kids." Ari refused to move from his safe spot to answer.

After a few minutes, they ended up helping each other off the floor since they were both still shaking hard enough to need the extra support.

"For now, though, bed." Beau said firmly. His shaky smile, however, betrayed his false confidence. It was easy for him to see that his boyfriend was still very shaken by what had just occurred. They hobbled their way into the bedroom and sat the doctor down on the bed while Beau went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash off his face. Ari couldn't help but to quietly despair as the other man brought a trashcan over to the bedside, the seemingly innocent bucket acting as an omen for worse days to come. Sighing at his anxious love, Beau turned off the light and slipped beneath the covers, wrapping them both up in an attempt to quell their shudders.

Beau, having always been an easy sleeper, slipped off into slumber within minutes, his mouth hanging open as his breaths whistle in and out in a gentle rhythm.

Ari knew that, if he followed the standard progression of the disease, he would be up again in a few hours, unable to keep anything resembling nutrients inside his system.

Ari didn't sleep at all that night, his standard insomnia pairing with the death knell to create a night of foreboding and unease. He spent the night paralyzed in their bed just waiting for the next round of illness to hit, his fist clenched in the fabric of Beau's shirt. He'd found that once the gastrointestinal issues started, they never stopped for long in any of his patients. It was the first sign, but one that was quickly followed by severe sickness, disability, and finally, death.

He couldn't exactly deny that he had had a panic attack earlier that night now, but he considered it justified. It wasn't every day that a person realizes that they're going to be directly responsible for their significant other's life or death.

Beau slept through the night.

-||-

At precisely five o'clock, the alarm clock rang out, startling Beau awake with a jerk. He swears he needs to change that stupid song soon. It drove him nuts every morning, but it woke him up effectively, so it did its job. Maybe, he was supposed to hate his alarm clock music. He'd have to ask Ari what he thought. He had to wake up to it too, after all.



Turning off the alarm next to him, Beau turned around in bed to ask his boyfriend about it only to see Ari just watching him with bags under his eyes that would have had to be checked in as luggage if they were to fly anywhere. It was obvious that he hadn't slept a wink. The previous night flooded back into his head, the picture of his "I never cry during movies, not even the ones where the dog dies" boyfriend collapsed on the floor gasping for air while tears poured down his face unchecked. He didn't think Ari even noticed he was crying through it. Beau reached his hand up and held it a bit away from Ari's cheek, searching his eyes to see if it was okay before he touched him. He had flinched away so violently the night before.

Seeing no alarm on his face, Beau cupped his cheek, smiling softly. "I'd tell you good morning, but I suspect that it hasn't been a very good one for you so far."

Ari opened his mouth in an attempt to speak, but only ended up projecting a horrible sort of gurgling noise that evoked a memory in Beau of recovering from almost drowning in a pool as a kid. After clearing his throat several times and downing the entire glass of water next to the bed, Ari tried again, croaking out, "Not been a particularly good morning, no."

It looked like getting out those few words had exhausted the doctor. He had slumped back against the pillow and gone straight back to staring intently at him. Beau was used to being stared at uncomfortably (his special needs kids tended to either always stare at him while teaching or only keep track of where he is so that they can avoid any possible eye contact), but having it come from Ari was certainly unusual.

Knowing his words would be poorly received and almost certainly denied, Beau knew he had to at least try. “I don’t think you should go into work today. Whatever you say, I know you’re not okay right-”

“I have to go in.” Ari didn’t even let him finish his sentence, his eyes blocks of stone despite the fact that the doctor was shaking from stress and exhaustion.

“You know, mental health days are a thing, even for doctors—especially for doctors. They have substitutes for a reason. They can survive without you for one day.”

Beau knew he had picked the wrong words as soon as they left his mouth. Ari flinched and muttered, “That’s the crux, isn’t it?” If ever the word helpless had a look, Ari was projecting it from every line on his face. He cleared his throat again. “Regardless of whether I’m of use or not, I need to be there.”

Beau knew there was no fighting him on this. He was just going to watch his love work himself into the ground unless something changed. He sighed, changing tactics.

“Why don’t we go take a shower then? Wash off some of the disgustingness of yesterday?”

Ari nodded, looking grateful that he hadn’t continued to argue. Beau got out of bed first, holding out a hand for his partner to take. They didn’t shower together every morning of course, they were both much too busy for that, but it was nice to be able to take care of each other in such a base way as washing. It was definitely something special to him, and he thought it was something special to Ari as well.

Walking hand-in-hand to the bathroom, Ari's grip almost crushingly tight, Beau turned on the water and let it start to heat up while he gazed at his partner placing the towels on the towel warmer (best purchase ever). To say that he was worried about Ari was an understatement. He still didn't know what had caused that awful panic attack yesterday, only that it had been linked to him throwing up and whatever Ari was dealing with at work recently. Beau hated that he wouldn't talk to him about what was going on. He was pretty sure that Ari was under the misguided notion that he couldn't handle hearing about blood and guts and all things not to do with sunshine. However, he knew that that was not a problem he could solve right now when there were much more pressing matters at hand, like how to keep his boyfriend from completely falling apart. Making a decision, Beau turned around and tested the water before attempting to pull off his clothes only to be hindered by the fact that Beau's hand was still very much occupied.

"You know, I might need that hand if we're ever actually going to shower. The water is on and everything; seems a waste not to use it."

The man with over twelve years of higher education seemed startled by this fact and dropped his hand reluctantly. "I don't need your sass right now, asshole."

"Oh? No creative ones for me today? Not gonna call me a dillweed or the first slice of bread that nobody wants? I think my favorite one of yours was when you called me the human personification of the common cold whenever I ate the leftover half of that slice of cheesecake you'd been saving. Also, I'm pretty sure my sass is at least

seventy-five percent of the reason why we're together." Beau smirked, hoping the other man would play along and tease back like usual.

Beau's face fell whenever Ari just turned around and began shucking off his clothes perfunctorily, getting into the shower whenever he'd finished. Perhaps hoping for a smile this morning had been too much Beau thought as he did the same. He grabbed the shampoo out of Ari's hands before he could use it and began to wash his partner's dark hair. He tried his best to massage out some of the stress that stuck between the doctor's eyebrows with a scalp massage with some success. The creases in Ari's forehead relaxed a small amount and he leaned forward into Beau's chest, mimicking the position he took last night when he finally calmed down.

Beau just sat and rubbed the back of his neck for as long as Ari would let him, determined to give what comfort he was allowed.

Eventually, however, Ari stood back up and washed out the suds, grabbing the body wash after and giving himself a quick scrub down before handing it off to Beau for him to do the same.

"Sit down on the ledge once you're done. You're too damn tall otherwise," Ari said, brandishing the shampoo bottle. Beau smiled and did as he was told, grateful that one part of this draining morning remained normal. He pushed a few bottles out of the way and sat precariously on the protruding seat in the corner, leaning his head down for care. Hands began to card through his hair gently, rubbing shampoo into the strands. Beau was ultimately a very tactile person and this was easily one of his favorite things in

the world. However, this was also one of the times where Ari was most easily talked to as the doctor got into a service mindset. He couldn't just let the moment pass in affectionate bliss.

"I know you feel like you can't really talk to me about your work stuff," Beau looked at him from under his hair before he could interrupt. "But if you can't talk to me, I really do think you need to talk to somebody that understands what it's like to be in your shoes, another doctor or something," The fingers started to dig into his skull a bit. "You can't continue like this, Ari. That panic attack last night was really bad, watching from the outside. What even happened yesterday? When I threw up, you acted like I was going to die."

The fingers running through his hair stopped. Beau looked up at Ari and just saw devastation. "What?" The teacher was just so confused.

The doctor's face went carefully blank. "The disease... the thing that I've been dealing with at work. It starts with that. Those that get it generally end up dead."

"Oh.

"Oh honey, no. I'm fine. I feel perfectly healthy this morning. I just ate some soy yesterday accidentally. You know what that does to my stomach. Linda offered me some of her lunch without telling me it was vegetarian and thought she would surprise me after I tried it by telling me it wasn't actually meat that I'd just eaten. You could definitely say that I was surprised!" Beau laughed awkwardly, internally cursing Linda's name for putting him and his boyfriend through all this drama over a taco.

Ari just looked like he had slapped him in the face. “I had wondered why you didn’t get sick again afterwards. I was waiting for it,” he said faintly. Beau was pretty sure a light breeze could push him over, so he stood up and hugged the man, who just stood there like a limp fish. That was fine though. He’d been through a lot of unnecessary shit in the past twelve hours. He couldn’t really imagine what was going through his head at the moment, so he just held him, letting him readjust his reality.

That was, until something dripped into his eye, setting his world on fire.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, shit, ow, oh god!” He frantically scrubbed his eye to get the shampoo they’d forgotten about out of it. No tears shampoo, my ass, he thought as tears poured down his face.

He froze when he heard a chuckle, the sound of joy (and schadenfreude) out of place in his world of fiery torment. “Stop! Stop rubbing it! Just let the water do its job and wash it out,” Ari said as the doctor pulled his hands away from his eyes.

He wondered what his life had come to when he was actually glad that he had shampoo in his eyes since it made his love laugh. Ari made him sit with his face under the water for the next minute or so, telling him all about the harmful effects of rubbing your eyes and how you could damage your corneas and Beau was never happier to listen to one of his lectures.

“You still need to go talk to someone though. All of that wasn’t only about me. You’ve been off for at least a week and a half.”

“Alright, Beau.”

-||-

Going into the hospital that day felt like walking into a firefight with a target on his chest. The minute he got to his floor, he was bombarded by nurses and family members all wanting his attention for something. To say it was overwhelming was an understatement. He plastered on a smile though and tried to be as methodical as possible about dealing with it all when all he really wanted to do was go hide in the bathroom. One of the only reasons he didn’t was because he knew that they could get to him there too. He was forced to carry around a work phone for a reason. They had to make sure he knew that he was always their slave after all.

When he could get away from the initial swell of duties, he started on his rounds for the day. Stopping by each of the rooms, he found a tiny little microbiome in each room, all with wildly different opinions of him. Having a (quite full) bedpan chucked at one’s head was not really what Ari considered a polite greeting, but he certainly wasn’t going to tell Ms. Teague otherwise. Mr. Charlie Fowell, the forty-eight-year-old man in room six seemed to be in high spirits, however. Ari got trapped there for at least twenty

minutes listening to the man gush about his son and how much time his hospital stay had given them to see each other and bond. Ari had never seen anyone so happy about staying in the hospital (or a game of Crazy Eights) in his life. He seemed to be improving on top of that, which was unusual from the other case precedents but certainly not unwelcome. He had so much energy and life to him, even at 8:30 in the morning. Ari was able to leave that room smiling, even if he knew it wouldn't last past the next room.

He noticed as he was walking down the hallway that Bethany's room had been left empty. Perhaps even this morning's head nurse had been affected by her and couldn't bear to see it filled quite yet either. Ari imagined Bethany had that effect on a lot of people. He stopped in front of the entryway for a moment, just a moment, to let himself grieve before he had to move on with his day.

Finally, noon rolled around and Joyce sent him away from the ward to 'actually go eat something before you keel over, you idiot' as she fielded off other nurses bringing him issues that could be dealt with later.

He found Dr. Michalski in the doctor's lounge when he made it up there. When their lunches coincided, the boisterous man tended to force his companionship on the doctor, but today Ari was grateful. The doctor was probably the closest thing to a friend that he had amongst his peers in this hospital.

"Ari! How are you doing this fine afternoon? I have a case I saw yesterday that I want to tell you about. Have you ever heard of a person getting an entire Buzz Lightyear toy stuck in their anus? I had to try so hard not to giggle when they were sent to me.



The wings had activated and everything! Part of me was just going ‘to infinity and beyond’ the whole consultation.” Dr. Michalski obviously had no compunction about giggling now as he told his story.

Setting down his food next to the internist, Ari said, “I’ve seen more than my fair share of ‘Buzzes’ up people’s rear ends, thank you. Inner city hospitals are amazing places to do your ER rotations.”

“Plus, your fair share of ‘Woodys’ too, I’d imagine.”

“More than you would think.” Ari shuddered. That was an interesting couple of months from medical school that would stick with him for the rest of his life.

There was a pause while Dr. Michalski looked at him calculatedly. “Is everything alright, son? How’re those cases that you mentioned at last week’s meeting? Did you figure it out?”

“Not exactly. We’re still doing more tests.” He steeled himself. “I wanted to talk to you about something to do with that anyways.”

Ari didn’t want to talk about himself and he had gone through these past couple of days, but, loathe as he was to admit it, Beau was right. He needed some help. Even though he had entirely too much pride to go see a therapist, he hoped that talking to another doctor that understood the pressure would help.

Lowering his voice, Ari began. “I’ve been treating these patients for over a week now and, not only can I not actually find out what is actually wrong with them, I feel like

I haven't been helping them at all. I've had several of those with the same symptoms die on me, and I feel absolutely helpless to stop it. Yesterday was awful. There was this girl, she was only fifteen." Ari looked down into his lap, shame filling his mind.

"She died yesterday. She was one of those people that everyone couldn't help but adore, she was going to go so far in life, and I feel like I killed her." Ari felt a stone in his throat, and he tried desperately to shove it down with a drink of water. Dr. Michalski was uncharacteristically silent.

"I...uh. Actually had a panic attack yesterday because I thought that my partner had the same thing and just knew I wasn't going to be able to do anything. I've never felt more useless in my life." The night before flashed back into his head, the constant terror coursing through his body as he lied awake, vigilant and clinging to Beau's shirt.

"We think that he's actually fine, but nothing like that has ever happened to me before, and I still feel like I've failed every one of my patients here. I don't even want to be here honestly because I'm not even making a difference." He tapered off, realizing he's getting into much more personal territory with Dr. Michalski than he originally intended.

Looking up at the other man, he was startled to see that Dr. Michalski was only looking at him with empathy, not just going to slap him on the back and tell him to cheer up like he half-expected. "I'm sorry that this has been so hard on you. You're not alone though. I think most physicians really struggle with their patient's deaths at some point in their career. You just got to it a bit earlier than most because of this thing that's

going around.” Ari’s wondered if that was unlucky or not that he was going through this first. He opened his mouth to ask about the internist’s own experience, but Dr. Michalski continued.

“The hard truth is, eventually, medicine will fail every patient. You can’t really save anyone because they’ll only ever die in the end. So what’s the point, right?” Ari had never heard the other man be negative about anything, so to hear this was severely out of character, or maybe Dr. Michalski was a very different man than what he thought.

“It took me a long time to come to terms with this myself after I witnessed a massive car accident where, despite my presence and my knowledge, could do nothing to save any of the eight people involved. I got depressed and emotionally shut down for months after that. I couldn’t face the fact that *Dr. Michalski* was useless. Why go through all that training if you can’t make a difference when it matters, right?”

The parallels to his own thoughts from the past several days were striking, sticking deep into his mind as he listened.

“I was bone tired all the time. Everything in my life took more effort than I thought it was worth. So, after a while of being a robot with a fake smile and no life to speak of, I decided that I either needed to figure out how to deal with what had happened or kill myself, and the second option sounded like it took too much effort.”

Ari couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Dr. Michalski, one of the cheeriest people he had ever met, had been suicidal? Being a doctor had driven him to that? Why

wasn't this something they talked about in medical school if it was such a huge problem?!

"I took some time off of work. Yes, I left my patients for three weeks to get myself together again. I also went to talk to somebody for a couple of months. That lady helped me immensely, and I found that just because somebody died, doesn't mean you failed. There's always going to be something that goes wrong and is out of your hands. But even more than that, *Dr. Michalski* was useless on that day because there was nothing that I could have done to save them, but *I*, the human being, was not. I sat there with three of those people as they died and did my best to make their passing as calm and easy as possible. I did my job as a member of humanity even if I felt like I failed in the ways that counted.

"What matters wasn't the fact that they died, because everyone is going to die and we would have no need for doctors if dying was the only important part of living. What mattered were the emotions they had while they were dying. My job at that point was to make that experience as easy as possible. Being a doctor isn't really about curing a disease. It's about relieving suffering. All of our training is necessary to help us find the best way to do that."

The voices of anxiety and helplessness that had been screaming in Ari's head quieted for the first time in more than two days. Dr. Michalski had just given him a lot to think about. The internist had a completely different view on medicine and humanity and, in his world, Ari wouldn't have to be perfect. However, his thoughts were

interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone. Answering it, he was summoned back to his ward with a brusque demand from the head nurse. As he stood up, Ari looked down at Dr. Michalski with a new respect.

“Thank you for listening to me ramble. I...need to think about what you said, but I appreciate you telling me about what happened to you. I know that probably wasn’t pleasant to recount.” With his usual smile, yet a distant look in his eye, Dr. Michalski sent him off with a goodbye and a slap on the back which carried less force behind it than usual.

As he was about to walk out the door though, the internist called out, “Hey Ari! Try to think about that what you felt when you first started in medicine. What joy sticks in your mind? Use that.”

-||-

As Ari went through the rest of his day, he continued to think on what Dr. Michalski had told him. What joy? There were a few stories that stuck out in his mind of miracles he got to be a part of or lives he was able to change, but there was one experience that laid underneath all of them, that had become a foundational part of his character without him even realizing it. His first patient death.

For many, this was somewhat of a traumatic experience, but his was somewhat beautiful. During his ER rotation in medical school, he was placed in a Level II Trauma Center which was well known for seeing grizzly injuries. He was quite excited going in as he was anticipating getting to see something interesting in the during his stay. However, it wasn't the open femur fracture he saw that day that occupied his mind after, but what occurred with a woman in her eighties with kidney failure and the dying man in the same room only separated by a sheet. There was no trauma involved; instead, the man was having a heart attack, and Ari watched him deteriorate over the course of three hours. He had been interacting with both patients for some time and created a certain repertoire with them when the man had crashed.

Suddenly, a whole team of people poured into the room and chaos reigned, or at least that's what it sounded like from across the sheet. All the other patients in the ER took a backseat to the actively dying man in Room 2, including the older woman that was becoming quite concerned and anxious about all the noise, knowing what it meant when one patient got all the attention. Ari had gone to look at what was happening and was immediately beckoned to the bedside and told to take over CPR. That was a day of firsts for him: first time to perform CPR on a living being, first patient death, first time to talk with the family afterward, and first time to wheel a dead body out of a hospital room into a place of grieving.

While the man was dying and after his turn for CPR was over, Ari was watching from the outskirts of the room when he had heard the woman behind the sheet hyperventilating. He realized then that the dying man in the room was not the only one

who needed care. The woman was in a panic hearing, but unable to see, a man's last moments. People in the medical field tend to forget that the general population wasn't accustomed to death, and she was left entirely alone to imagine the worst. Ari had knelt next to her bed, held her hand, and tried his best to draw her into conversation until things quieted down on both sides of the sheet.

He left the hospital that day to go to another hospital, the children's hospital across town, where his brother was staying. He had Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia and a nasty case of pneumonia that had him on a ventilator. He had realized there that he had reached a stagnant place in his pursuit to become a physician; Ari was simply following the steps that he was told to follow by the other med students, the professors, and the residency programs.

Experiencing death firsthand tends to make humans philosophical, and Ari knew then that he wanted to spend his life figuring out the rollercoaster of thoughts and emotions that he felt sitting next to a boy fighting for his life thinking about a man who lost his and the woman afraid of staring death in the face.

While practicing, doctors get to see the entirety of the human experience. Hospitals, war zones, and the pages of a book are some of the only places where the grand range of human emotion and reasoning can be explored, which is the reason why so many medical dramas are made, Ari figured. The art of human healing is full of stories of every kind and, as anyone who knew him at all when he was kid would say, Ari loved

stories. He used to adore learning about humanity in all its oddities and fallacies. He wondered what had happened over the years. When had he shut himself off from that?

He had wanted to be a part of these humans' stories in a meaningful way, which is where being a doctor had come in. Doctors got the privilege of having enough knowledge to plan a course of treatment and enough authority to provide comfort in some of the worst moments in a person's life. He had originally fallen quite close to Dr. Michalski's way of thinking, and that had been when he was happiest.

-||-

Over the next couple of days, Ari realized a couple of things. First, if he wanted to be able to continue doing what he trained so long and hard to do, he needed to find a way back to the point where he loved being a doctor, and he would need help to do that. He began to go out of his way to meet with another nurse or doctor to talk about their experiences with death and how that's affected their lives. He got brushed off more than once, but he would just move on to the next person. He collected more and more stories of helplessness and depression that people would experience as they went through some of the roughest adjustment periods of their lives. It happened to almost every person he talked to, so Ari was determined not to let it be swept under the rug anymore.



Second, he found that some of his patients would improve on their own. They tended to split into two packs, those that spontaneously began to get better without ever going through the 'bleeding openly through every orifice' part and those that went through the entire progression of the disease only ending in death. It seemed like the disease that they had was most similar to Marburg virus like Dr. Michalski had mentioned during that first meeting, yet must be a different strain or something altogether different as it did not match all of the symptomatic markers. He had eventually called in to the CDC for help only to be told that there was really nothing more that he could have been doing for them. They take his blood, urine and stool samples and whisk them off to their lab to not be heard from for another two months. At that point, they tell him exactly what he had already known. The disease was similar to Marburg but currently unknown. Helpful.

Charlie Fowell is one of those that gets better. The father looked slightly disappointed at his discharge until Ari had told him that he would still need some care at home until he got back on his feet. His son had volunteered (or was voluntold. Ari couldn't tell. There was a strange look involved between the father/son pair) and Mr. Fowell was off again, talking at fifty miles per hour with a sheer look of joy on his face as he was wheeled out of the ward.

The now eleven-month-old wasn't quite as lucky. It seemed like there was some damage to the baby's brain from the high fever, but with how elastic infant's brains are, there was still hope for recovery. He never got a very warm welcome back in their room, however.

Bethany's mother invited him to the girl's funeral, an invitation he was going to decline until Beau (who was just fine after throwing up the one time) mentioned that the doctor's being there wouldn't be for his own benefit, but for the family's. He went, and brought a bouquet of sunflowers for the memorial. It didn't feel like anywhere near enough, but her mother came up to him afterwards and hugged him, tears streaming down her face.

Ari didn't consider himself 'fixed'. He still felt one incident away from breaking sometimes, but he was readjusting his world view, and that was meant to be painful. He had spent too much time cynical and stand-offish, losing the humanity from his practice of medicine. Things were going to hurt more when he got it back, but there was so much more joy to be found in it too. The wall he set up around himself had only protected him from seeing the best parts of the people around him. So many people were watching over him while he was experiencing all that turmoil. Now, he felt like he was watching them, too.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Levinson, Victoria J. Fraser, and Thomas H. Gallagher. 2007. "The Emotional Impact Of Medical Errors On Practicing Physicians In The United States And Canada". *The Joint Commission Journal On Quality And Patient Safety* 33 (8): 467-476.
- Schernhammer, Eva. 2005. "Taking Their Own Lives — The High Rate of Physician Suicide". *New England Journal of Medicine* 352 (24): 2473.
- Waterman, Amy D., Jane Garbutt, Erik Hazel, William Claiborne Dunagan, Wendy
- Williams, Eric S., Linda Baier Manwell, Thomas R. Konrad, and Mark Linzer. 2007. "The Relationship of Organizational Culture, Stress, Satisfaction, and Burnout with Physician-Reported Error and Suboptimal Patient Care". *Health Care Management Review* 32 (3): 203-212.