

The Devil Between

By Lila Josey James

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DX: CA

Yesterday, I came out transgender. This morning, I left my partner. Currently, I'm walking uphill towards the emergency room. It's hard work, but I manage not to cry.

"No, that can't be it," I try to assure myself. My stomach churns. I'm five blocks away. Though, it feels like feet.

I walk slower. Trying to avoid people if I can, but it's the morning rush. The F train rumbles below. Screeching to an elongated stop.

I look back at the building. It's one of the many which sprouted up during covid. A line of patients protrudes. Blocking the entrance for the cafe next door.

"Fuck," I admit, "That really didn't go well."

I trip between pedestrians, walking the opposite direction. There's a vacant stoop in the shade. The edges are crumbling.

"Thank god," I curse.

As I approach the brownstone, the intersection reads "6th St and 6th Ave".

"Just one sixth away from the devil", I laugh.

Crows caw in the shadows. They swoop and dive. A petal lands on my head as I sit.

"Ok." I panic. Trying to take in slow breaths. They come out rattled and brief.

On top, I observe the entire neighborhood. Large families stroll by. Dogs and children in tow. It smells of suntan lotion and hot coffee. Just another morning.

A minute passes by. My stomach growls. Even the thought makes me nauseous. My mind meanders. It gets stuck in the last half-hour.

I try to make sense of what I was just told. I can't. Not a single thought sticks in this storm. But, as I close my eyes, I begin to feel something.

The wind rolls in from the harbor. From Sunset Park up Greenwood Cemetery, to me.

Whispering, soon, it'll be too hot. Every square inch of shade will be occupied.

I squint my eyes. Then, in a last ditch effort, look directly up. It doesn't work.

I try to hide my face. I'm flushed out. Red and running. A fox sprinting for the tree line.

I tell myself everything will be alright. It has to be. I don't believe it for a second. It just seems like something you do in this situation. Like saying *sorry* at a funeral.

I pull out a joint. Roll it through my middle finger and thumb.

"Guess I probably shouldn't," I think while flicking the red lighter.

"After that ", I give in, "Fuck it."

I let out a large plume. Proceed to cough. Then, shake violently as I spit, and take another. Blowing rings that grow with distance. Zoning out as they do. Drifting back but a moment ago. Living now what I couldn't then.

I'm waiting in the clinic. It's small, packed, and quiet. Fluorescent lights flicker.

A nervousness permeates the air. It's oddly still and endearingly silent.

I hear my name. I head towards the nurse rapping her pen.

"James," she questions. Eyebrow raised.

"Unfortunately," I reply with a one-sided smirk.

"Come with me, sir" she guides.

I'm wearing a green dress.

"Actually," I pause, "I'm trans."

"Oh, ok," She turns.

I'm brought to a small room. It's damp, moldy, yet somehow sterile. Vague whiffs of alcohol haunt the air.

"Do you have any covid symptoms," she asks, pointing to the table.

"No," I lie, moving from the chair.

"Alright, what brings you in today", she looks at me.

"Just an ulcer," I point at my stomach. There's a bulge.

She looks confused.

"OK, why do you think it's an ulcer?" Her back has stiffened. Eyes look up from the computer.

"From the stress," I state. "You know, rent and all."

I tell her about the bullshit of my work as she inspects me. She's quick yet firm with her presses.

"Arms up, open your mouth, cough" she proceeds, "You have a slight fever. 101.1, sir"

"You don't have to call me Mam," I choke, "but you can't call me sir". This time I'm firm. "Please."

"Sorry", she says.

I try to continue talking. She pauses, so do I. There's a double double take. Then, presses turn to stabs.

"Wait here," she stammers.

A breeze follows her out the room. It smells of shampoo. Before I can process what happened, the doctor slides through the door.

He's a bit portly in a boyish way. Like he's still growing into his lab coat. He puts down his clip board upon seeing my wrinkled face.

"How are you?" the doctor asks.

"You got here pretty quick," I huff. "The waiting room was full on my way in."

"Ah, and it still is."

He motions for me to lay down. It's a gentle gesture. The tenderness is out of place.

"Alright sir, when--"

"Not a sir, mam," I break in.

"What," he smiles.

"She's trans", the nurse pipes.

Her mood has changed. Her movements are more bouncy. She keeps her eyes on me. I hone mine on her.

"Nice nails by the way," I test.

I try to stay perfectly still. Each crinkle of paper cracks my confidence. Every crunch, a clinical catastrophe.

"I just came out. Like yesterday." I look at the ceiling. The tiles here are out of alignment.

"Oh, congrats! How's that going," he's looking at my abdomen, taking it in.

“Well, I’m here,” I half joke. “And I lost my job, but my dog doesn’t care.”

“Right, um I’m going to feel around a bit. Sounds good?” his hands hover ready.

“Crunch,” I nod.

More presses. His eyes widened. Mine slam shut.

Immediately, he withdraws his hand. I hear the snapping of gloves and the trash can. I slowly open my eyes—confused.

“That’s it?” I demand.

There’s the briefest pause. I register softness. It takes my breath, and dampens my fire.

“Well.” He takes my hand and presses it on my abdomen.

“Do you feel that?” he asks.

“Feel what?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“Ah, ok. Feel that hard mass sticking out,” he moves my hand around while watching me closely.

“Yeah, you mean my abs?” I ask slowly.

“Haa—” it slips out too quickly for him to catch.

“No, no, this isn’t muscle. Feel,” he presses my hand harder.

I whimper. Then go limp. He loosens his grip. I'm radiating.

"Abs don't hurt when you push on them" he enunciates every vowel.

"Got it," I spit between gasps.

"How did you walk in here?" he finally lets out. Striking a pose.

I'm here, but I'm not. Stuck in a half daze. Sitting in the chair, but also floating on the ceiling.

The doctor is in the corner. On that stupid round rolly stool. He swivels from computer to paper several times over.

Finally, he settles with a pen. Furiously, his hand scribbles. The wheels slide with each stroke.

"I don't like doctors. Even the cute ones," I decide.

He starts talking again. I try to listen, but only catch bits and pieces. He mentions something about necrosis, bones, and blood. Like the ingredients in a spell.

“So we don’t know what type.” He looks up, “Not yet, and not here.”

“Wait, what,” I snap back, “You’re saying I could die in a month or be fine?”

“I mean, you’ll find out soon enough. Wait here one second” then he leaves.

I drink in the stillness. A keen ringing in the air. For the briefest moment, there’s the absence of everything.

He comes crashing back with several doctors in tow. All of them are young. Large dark circles under their eyes mark them family.

“What, are you all on your lunch break,” I giggle.

“What are you,” one of them asks.

“What,” I yelp

“Your pronouns, are you a—”

They list off several. I roll my eyes, and sigh. Oblivious, they continue.

They each repeat the examination. Every doctor pushes in the exact same spot. Asking “does that hurt”.

I wince each time. Finally, I shoot up:

"I'm going to shit myself if you keep doing that."

I toss myself back down. Thanking my feral side for strength. I nurture it. Expecting she'll be needed soon.

The "What are you comment" is still seething. They're all huddle together trading secrets. The portly doctor waddles towards me.

"It's huge!" a short doctor whispers to their peers.

"Thanks," I say sharply, "I grew it myself". It clearly hits, as he sinks behind the others.

The youngest doctor goes to speak, but mine stops him. Turning back to me, he says,

"I'm not going to lie. It's probably cancer."

The other doctors nod in *silent* agreement

"It can't be that bad if I walked in here," I demand.

"Let me rephrase," he continues, "it is cancer."

"We're going to call an ambulance, " the third doctor says.

My head is floating. I look down. Eyes stretched. I shake left to right.

"Is there something wrong with that," the blonde doctor asks.

"I don't have insurance," I admit.

"Can you make it to Presbyterian?" my portly fellow asks.

"It's closer than my home is to here," I lie.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. I feel small under its weight. I try not to blush, and fail.

"You have to go right there. Directly to the hospital," he commands.

My doctor walks over to the counter. He grabs the note from the desk. Then hands it to me.

"Ok, what about today's fee," I shrug, he sighs.

"I don't normally do this", he admits

"Yeah, likewise." I return.

Then, we head to the front. I wave goodbye. Note pinned on my chest. Oblivion.

Directly between the clinic and hospital, I took this seat on the stoop. Smoked this joint before walking into the ER. For my health.

There's just one thing left to do. I pull out my phone.

"For Estelle," I steady myself. Then, dial from memory.

I wonder if she really blocked me. I half consider this as my heart flutters. My hands have been shaking all day.

My recents are deleted. I have to press each digit. The combination of past and present unlock my demons

Ring.

"Guess not," I sink.

The sun has broken through the haze. It's absolutely beautiful.

Ring

All I can think is that god isn't real. This is all just random.

Ring

I know for certain she hates me. There's a pause. It stretches for eons.

"Click ", an absence of dial tone.

"Hello," she says slowly as if I must be confused.

"Hey," I try to say sweetly. "Sorry to call so soon, but do you think you could walk Estelle this afternoon? "

Another pause. I can't tell if she's offended. Estelle much preferred curling up in her lap. Regardless, she says nothing. It takes a few seconds of silence before I break.

"I can pay you." I offer softly.

"What are you talking about," she snaps, "I'm supposed to be in a meeting."

"Look." I pant then stop.

Taking the moment. Holding the both of us. Savouring the last seconds.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"I don't know what to do, but I have cancer," I whisper,

“What?” she chokes.

“It’s fine—really. They just need to figure out what kind at the ER. It’ll probably take all day but it’s really not a big deal.” I try to convince myself.

There’s intelligible sounds in the speaker. Perhaps just static, but I swear I hear her catch her breath.

“I’ll get you a cab and everything. It’s worth knowing Estelles with you.” I admit.

“Wait, why,” she tersely retorts, “ you don’t need to pay me”.

My voice crumbles. “I know,” I croak, “but.”

“I know,” she interrupts softly, “I know”.

All I can manage is “Thank you,”. It is so quiet I don’t think she hears me. We both stay hanging on the line. Wavering between two days ago and now.

“XXXX,” she states.

“Yeah,” I ask.

“Call your family”

“What?”

“This isn’t for friends. This is a family matter.”

“Liste—”

“Click”

I stand up from the stoop. Legs weak, I grab the railing to manage. Slowly rising up by the second.

“Whatever happens, I walked there”. I etch this talisman into the foundation of my being. Whatever happens next, whatever they call me, no-one can take away that I walked in.

I take the note from my pocket. Squeeze it. It’s nondescript. Just a piece of paper.

“Guarentee it starts with *He*—has no insurance,” it comes out as a hex.

“I am leaving partners, jobs, and family.” I continue, “What the fuck is happening”.

A few pigeons flap out of my way. Beneath my feet, leaves scurry. There’s a screeching sound as the G train grinds out the station.

I reconsider the hollowness I feel. Something isn’t functioning how it should. That much is obvious.

I can’t quite stomach anything. It comes up vile. I’m at the intersection.

I curse and spit. Then, close my eyes. I’ve arrived.

In my dream last night a voice kept repeating. Soft and gentle, it rang true. Only one topic to debate.

A maze of arrows guides around the block. There’s another building with a long awning. Finally, sliding doors marked “H”.

She whispered “it’s alright to die. That’s allowed. It’s alright. Don’t be afraid.”

We’re well off 7th Avenue, but it’s still incredibly loud and busy. Nobody on the block is smiling. Everyone has slight panic in their eyes.

I told the voice, “No. I can’t go. There’s work to be done.” Begrudgingly, it lands true.

Sirens dance in an echo chamber of steel. These high rises serve the community, but also reverberate its drama. Several more ambulances come and go before I walk in.

“Your choice,” the voice had said.

I walk down the entrance hallway. Windows on either side. There’s a guard sitting several feet up at the end. In a little wooden booth, he has to bend down to speak,

“What are you here for,” he asks nonchalantly.

“Emergency room, please,” I sputter out. Flashing the note.

He points to his right, I turn to my left. Then I see it. A line with no start.

I head over. Settling in for a long wait. There’s a tap on my shoulder. I take my headphones off and turn.

“Note please,” the nurse points.

I hand it over. She scans it quickly. Those in front have turned. Watching, curiously.

Surely wondering.

The nurse doesn't let any hint escape. She is unflinching. A statue of stone.

"Alright," she says.

In one movement, she unclips a walkie-talkie swinging up. Her lips brush the speakers.

There's no telling what she's saying. So, I stare off.

To my right, there's a man from the local jail. He's clearly in pain but shackled nonetheless. He can't keep still.

Right in front of the nurses station, an elderly lady sits softly. There's an even older man beside her. I honestly can't tell which one they're here for. Maybe both? I remind myself this isn't funny.

"Take a seat please", the nurse guides with one hand.

There's a wheelchair. Then a quick prick. Now, I'm connected to a saline bag. There are white, red, and yellow bands around my wrist.

"To get you hydrated," she says.

"Oh, Ok," I question.

We take a series of sharp turns. There's a beep of an id badge, and double doors swing open.

I'm immediately hit with the humming of a well oiled machine. Clanky and old, but still dependable. How long has it been like this, I wonder.

Every corner smells different. Strong, pungent, foreign—but familiar in some way.

Promising misadventure as I sniff. We keep going. Further back.

As we pass through, I see people sprawled out on every available surface. Just a handful of patients, and their families, but it feels like a crowd. My chest hollows out.

"Don't worry." She says, "You're getting your own room. "

"Great," I croak.

"You're lucky we're not too busy." She informs me.

"Nobody wants to get sick on a holiday," I laugh.

We round another corner. I see a stranger, about my age. He is being wheeled in the opposite direction. We catch each other for but a moment.

Finally, I'm wheeled into a narrow room. A short nurse with a buzz cut is waiting. At 10 feet long, the room is just wide enough for three adults, but not the wheel chair.

'Alright, best of luck,' the nurse waves.

I manage to mouth an awkward thank you. There's a heavy door sealing the entrance. No sounds are drifting in. I doubt any can escape. It's unnecessarily bright. I try to turn, but catch the I.V.

I haven't heard a word this nurse has said. I like her though. She makes me feel calm, and taken care of. You can tell she's naturally a healer. Moreover, a safe person. She sees me.

I never say I'm trans. She never asks, but seems to know. Sparing me for the full weight of cancer. She dives into her craft.

"Do you mind needles," she asks again.

"Not really," I proudly share.

This is the truth. I know there are far worse things here than needles.

"That's good,"

“Yeah, I can’t imagine having cancer and caring,” I kid.

Without missing a beat, she adds,

“Actually, we just had a patient who had a needle broken off in their arm. Yeah, they were a kid when it happened. Imagine. Oh, not here,” she continues.

As she talks, she skillfully arranges plastic tubes. Putting specific labels on them. Asking me my name, age, and birth date. She triple checks each time before continuing.

“They had to get surgery to get it out. Now, they can’t stand needles, which makes perfect sense,” she shrugs, “Which arm?”

“I don’t care,” I admit.

Then, with decades of experience guiding her, she slides in an I.V. No pain, just a release. She found a thick vein. Noticeably deeper than the rest.

“We don’t want it coming out,” she glances through the corner of her eye. A slight grin. She tapes some type of tube to my arm.

I think about the warm liquid filling the tubes. It’s blacker than I imagined. A ruby in the dark. Showing only its finest hues. No reflections—just deep reds once blue.

Tube after tube, she keeps going. Around the seventh, she stops.

“How much blood do I have?” I ask,

She laughs, “About five liters, How old are you by the way?”

“33,” I mutter.

She places the tubes in a bag. Checking each one as she does. She looks relieved.

“So much of cancer has to do with age,” she whispers looking at the wall.

“Is that good,” I ask.

“For you it is”, she states blankly.

“Ok, Do you think I’ll get out of here in time to walk my dog? She’s crossing her paws,”

I ask.

There’s some stirring inside. It’s unfamiliar. Like shaking up a snowglobe. Everything settles, but in different places.

“It’s almost certainly some type of blood cancer,” she points to the test results.

"We're not sure what type. What's important is making sure it hasn't spread to your bones, given how advanced the tumor is," she continues, " see your LDH? It's off the charts."

She points at some hieroglyphics.

"Jokes on you, " I think, "I cried the whole way here. Now, I have nothing left."

She grabs my hand, "You'll want to start calling family. Maybe think about wrapping up any unfinished business."

"What, when can I go home," I peep. "I have a meeting later and."

It's the only thing I care about.

"You're going to be here for a while," she interrupts.

"No I'm not," I reply, "I can't afford that." I protest. As if she could change these facts.

"You have cancer," she continues with more softness, "your only job now is getting better."

My eyes widened. Arms go numb. I've never made money by taking care of myself, I think.

"We'll run more tests, get you healthy for chemotherapy, and we'll start the regime. "

"Chemo," I pant.

"Chemos," she corrects, "You'll definitely be doing several types, but it'd kill you right now".

"I didn't even know there was more than one chemo," I confess

"Oh, no cancer in the family?" She says while filling out another form. "That's lucky."

"I guess. I mean, nobody I know in my family has had cancer. No grandparents, cousins, or even pets."

"Let's hope it's a good one," She says.

"A good one?" I rattle.

She looks pale, "Some blood cancers can be cured", "Others have less than 1 percent survival. So, yes, let's hope it's a good one."

I don't believe it for a second. As if she can read my face, the nurse calmly continues,

“Don’t leave no matter what they tell you. They can’t force you to leave, insurance or not, but if you leave, they won’t let you back in.”

“That’s fucked up,” I yelp.

The cancer diagnosis made more sense than this. My abdomen moves from within. I’m not the only one fighting here.

A few tests come back with amazing speed. She doesn’t question why I hadn’t noticed how sick the tests were saying I was. She knows.

The other doctors wouldn’t even think to ask that. Oblivious that I was trying to kill myself. Subconsciously or not.

Before she goes, I get one more gift. I.V ativan, and suddenly things aren’t so bad. I don’t feel nauseous, and my demons float off.

I take a deep breath. I actually feel good, I think.

With an exhale, I pull out my phone. I dial my Mom from memory.

I deleted her number a few years ago. We’ve spoken once since then. This is completely my fault.

Regardless, she picks up. This is not to my surprise. Most people were having trouble with my no contact policy.

Last time we talked, I told her I called off my wedding. Because I wasn't straight. Baby steps.

Now, a season later, another change. In a twisted form of gratitude, I realize how much happier I am—it's me.

BX: Pending

A feral fucking faggot. That's what I've become. The door opens. I flinch.

Two nurses walk in. One is pushing a pole of machines. The other moves to change my IV bags. They move synchronously. Marking each hour on this cuckoo-clock.

It's always too dark or too bright. Never natural. Even when the lights are off, the room is painted from the outside in. Flashes slipping in with the whirlwind of sounds.

Conjuring thoughts of alien abductions.

"Name, DOB, and last bowel movement," she asks while taking my temperature, blood-pressure, and oxygen levels.

I'm given several shots, a few pills, and in return, give several tubes of blood.

"What time is it?" I groan.

"3AM," the older one responds.

I lay on my side. Face down as they finish their work. One is a trainee. New and eager.

Very talkative.

"Where am I," I manage.

This is some sort of sorting ward. Alive with death, devastation, and drudgery. Blasting 24/7.

As if on queue, a single sound stabs through. For the seventh time this night, We hear,

"Don't. Please. Please." in anguished cries, "Please. Don't leave me alone".

Outside, a pack of nurses are *leaving*. I smell the antiseptic. It lofts from door to door.

Promising future pain.

The pleas turn to curses. I ask the nurses to shut the door. They don't seem surprised. I try to follow suit.

My roommate by the window is Orthodox. He is also up. I'm in a romper with a pony tail. My nails are metallic gold. My makeup raccooning.

"Hey," I weakly wave.

Fingering my gold chain, I start the obligatory questioning,

"Wha. What are you in for," I ask?

The nurses are preparing a new IV line. The one showing the other the specific tubes and connectors. Something about butterflies and gauges. I suppose there are many.

"Ah nice to meet you," He sits up, and points to his stomach. "I can't eat. Just throw up." He motions his hands from stomach to mouth. Fingers wiggling in the air. I giggle.

"Me too," I share excitedly. Misery loves company.

“Oh, and that’s why you’re here?” He stares. “They put us stomach sickies together.” He laughs, pointing to the bathroom. “I think I know why,” he bellows. Cheeks red.

“He’s here for more than that” the older nurse says, looking at me disapprovingly. Her head tilted slightly. A smile of sorts appearing.

“And” I give in, “A *touch* of cancer.” I place my hand over my heart, and shrug.

“She has cancer,” I think. Not daring to risk the fragile care. A nurse shortage was obvious. “This is still Covid”, I remember.

“Ah”

The younger nurse cleans the caked blood from my arms. She mutters something to herself. About half way through cleaning, she stops.

A new needle is put in. I don’t flinch anymore. “That happened quick,” I internalize.

Then, as quickly as they came, they were gone.

“See you in an hour,” The younger one jokes then disappears into the chaos.

We both stay in bed for much of the morning and day. Neither of us makes a sound. In and out of consciousness. Time takes a special form. We’re simply hanging on.

Only the nurses coming and going punctuate the day. The trays of uneaten food pile in the corner. I can't imagine eating. The thought makes me sick.

After leaving the restroom, I drift into nothingness. Then awake to something sharp and thirsty.

It's morning. Maybe. Medical personnel are in, and out. I feel pulled under.

My arms are bruised. Crusted with blood again. It flakes off every time I reach. Purples, yellows, and greens swirl.

"Your Mom called again," the resident tells me. He's young, cute, and devastatingly exhausted.

"Yeah, she's crazy," I don't even look up. Wondering how she knew I was sick. I hadn't talked to anyone in my family for over a year. Not after the police.

My roommate is by the window on a call. He is pacing the edge. The tree tops show we're on the 4th or 5th floor.

"No, I'll call an Uber. They won't care," he huffs and puffs.

He has a pair of black shoes, pleated pants, and a white collared shirt laid out on his bed.

"Cute," I grin.

Two nurses rush in.

"Sir, you can't leave," the older one says.

"Watch me," he smiles.

She rolls her eyes. "The discharge is going to say *left against medical advice*. You understand that, right?"

"What medical advice," he snaps.

"Sir, your insurance won't—"

He snatches the pen. Glances at the paper. He drags the pen furiously. Then stops.

Paper torn.

"This pen," he bounces it off his side table, "is broken like this hospital."

I let a short "haa," slip.

As the nurses leave, the young one shares her eye roll with me. I smile

“Wait here,” the older one says.

He turns to me and winks.

“Of course, I’m not just going to run,” he comforts.

Not two seconds after the nurses leave, does he grab his bags. Stuffing shirt, pants, and shoes. Neatly but rushed.

“Health is wealth,” he winks, “Don’t worry about the money”. He peers out the door.

“There’s no price for life.” Once satisfied, he slings his bag over this shoulder, and calmly strolls out.

The older nurse comes back confused. New papers and pen in hand. She looks out the window. Just in time to see him close the cab door.

I laugh. She throws a sharp stare.

“Guess he didn’t want you to watch,” I joke.

“Right, they said if *you* don’t start eating, they’re gonna use a tube.” She informs with passionless fact.

I glare. She straightens up. I must be a pathetic sight.

“Why did he just leave,” she asks, genuinely confused.

“Code white room 554, code white” the intercom blares.

I tilt my head.

The room is frigid. It feels natural to twitch at this temperature. I’ve been hot, cold, sweating, and shivering. All within the same minute. An endless cycle. Drenched in sweat.

There’s a flicker in the shadows. In the back most corner. A waver?

Umbre dance between the right angle of the corner. A bolt of adrenal pins me down.

The absence of light is a humanoid shape. The edges swirl into the wallpaper patterns.

I keep looking, directly into the void. Sure enough, it's a specter.

A man made of shadow stares out. My skin crawls. No threatening moves are made.

It just stands there. Tall and lean. I don't know how, but I can tell it's watching me—has been. Then a flash.

He joins me above my body. Floating above, I look pale, emaciated, and beaten. Even on the ceiling, it's clear. This isn't going well.

I watch nurses come in. They perform their hourly checks. Poking my physical form—leeching blood. Another nurse slips a needle into the IV bag.

There's a ripple of emotion. Spreading from my heart to fingertips. For the first time in years, I honestly think,

"I don't want to die."

"Your choice," I hear to my surprise. "Don't worry, rest".

It feels like light enters my veins. Spreading a lucid dream. I fall into a deep sleep.

“It’ll all be alright,” I choke.

I wake up to a doctor and nurse walking into my room. Short rapid taps, followed by round deep thuds.

“Ah, good you’re up,” the nurse smiles. Opening the blinds.

Instantly, the glass domes of sleep and slumber shatter. Each shard cutting a piece of my life away. Until it’s just the hospital left.

Besides us humans, my room is empty. By choice, I’ve kept the room empty. Out of fear it would be regardless. This isn’t exactly the time one wants visitors, but certainly is when. It’s easier to be alone.

One scabbed leg is sticking out of the bed. The sock is missing. My stomach protrudes. Creating a smooth slope down the sheet. There’s a rapping on the door frame,

“Hmmm, let’s get you out of here,” the old man says as he leans out the door, “get him up to the 7th floor”. The doctor barks at two nurses in the station.

I huff. Then pause. Determined to get the best treatment, I eat it.

“I’m Dr. XXXX, your oncologist.”

He goes to shake my hand.

"We're getting you out of here today. To the cancer ward. The 7th floor. It's much more,

"He pauses,

"Calm," the nurse finishes.

"Thank you so much," I mutter about the misadventures of the last week.

He laughs, "Don't thank me yet. First, we need that biopsy" he reassures, "a spinal tap, and oh we'll need to get a PICC in."

"What," I state.

"You won't get a port before the first round."

"Code blue room 512, Code blue," Crackles the intercom.

"Make sure they get enough", he says while leaving,

I laugh.

"Sometimes they don't, and then we have to do it again" he pats my back, and then is off.

"Uhh, damn" I look up. "They're going to stick a needle in my stomach aren't they," I ask the doctor.

"They're going to *extract* a sample from your stomach, yes" He looks at me. "Don't worry, the CT machine guides them. It's hard for them to mess up. Later you'll get a port."

"And what's a pick?" I waiver. Images of ancient weapons fill my mind.

"Well, you'll need a catheter line into your heart," he says, "The PICC is a tube they thread from inside your bicep near to your heart. The drugs melt weaker veins"

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"The chemo, or biopsy," he asks.

I make a stabbing motion towards my stomach.

"I don't think so." he continues cheerfully,

“The only thing changing is knowing. Right? Then tomorrow is an upper and lower endoscopy,” he looks up, “We’re lucky to have gotten you in on such short notice.”

I take my two index fingers and poke them together. Looking at my nurse for reassurance.

A new nurse walks in. They have a medical bag. It looks heavy.

“Excactly, it’s not until four. So–.” She looks towards the new nurse.

She pulls out a large bottle. It appears to be water and milk. There’s a straw beside it.

“You need to drink this by midnight tonight,” she hands me the jug.

“No eating until tomorrow now,” The male nurse informs.

“It’s smoothie flavoured,” he exclaims.

“It’s a gallon,” I protests.

“Not all at once,” they all laugh.

And then we’re off. Rather, the nurse wheels me. I’ve already forgotten where we’re going, and why.

"How do you like Dr. XXXX," I ask.

"He's one of the best," she whispers, "Not all of them are. You got lucky."

"Really," I look up. "Some of the doctors here suck?"

"Ha, Big time," she confirms, "most are waiting to transfer to private practice. Or to head back to Connecticut."

"Woof," I bark.

We both laugh.

As we pass room 514, I notice there's a new patient. Completely unaware of three hours ago. It's unfair.

There's a man directly in front of me. He's handcuffed to the guardrail. No IVs, but a swarm of nurses.

He's choking for air. Turning white, his machines all start to beep. A nurse heads over.

Heavy footsteps, proceed a nagging voice.

"You have to breathe sir," the nurse says

"I know," the man says. "I want to."

I notice the tattoos. A spiderweb on the elbow, a name on their neck, and fearful tear filled eyes.

Finally, a nurse pushes in a needle. He goes limp. They wheel him back for prep.

"Don't worry—you're next," the nurse holding the needle looks and smiles.

My stomach drops.

There's a low whirring sound. A few clicks sound off. The scent of electricity makes my nose twitch.

The room is chambered, with a 20 foot ceiling. Black wires spiral down. Terminating in a large robotic circle.

A nurse motions to my left. I follow her hands over. My eyes get stuck on several needles. Each one larger and sharper than the last.

“Yikes,” I pant.

“Do you need help?” He asks.

I take his arm. Then rise hunched over. Finally, I shift the weight to my feet.

I stretch out from chair to table. Rolling my belly up. The doctor looks at me.

“Should take about half an hour,” he informs then turns.

He lifts the needle. It glistens in the spotlight. A star flashes at its tip.

It’s larger than I first thought.

“You ready,” he rings.

“No,” I admit.

I’m stabbed several times. Each time, the needle isn’t worth watching—but I do. In and out. Pressure, fire, then sweet numbness.

No problem. All I feel is a boba straw for tumors rummaging around. I'm aware something is digging in my stomach, but by pressure and fire only.

"The doctor said to make sure to get enough," I tell the operator.

"That shouldn't be a problem," he says looking into his machine.

"I'm going to extract a lymph node sample first," with that he slowly slides the first extraction needle into my stomach, "Good, stay there."

I feel it push. My skin keeps tightening, until, pop. It breaks through something and glides with ease. Slowing significantly, as it digs into rubber.

He grabs a longer needle. It's thinner, but this adds to its terror. My stomach twinges.

"All right, now a sample of the mass," he confirms.

Quicker now, the needle pops, slides, and then stops. Like he had gotten a feel of my insides.

Pressure. He pushes harder. I swear my back cracks. There's a ringing in my ears.

"Almost there," he says.

There's a large whirring sound above. The needle is swirling around in my stomach.

Biting my insides each time. He does this three more times.

Each time, he takes out the old needle. Then collects with a new one. I haven't blinked once. Frozen in sheer belief that if I stay still, everything will be fine. Every icicle sends shivers down my spine.

I make the mistake of looking down.

"Oh my fucking god," I tense up.

He places a cold metallic surface on the abdomen, and presses hard. Flattening out the slope. A grill press on the flat top.

Several more clicks, repositions, and then

"Alright, all done," he smiles.

"Are we done," I ask.

"For now Mr. James".

I'm helped out of the wheelchair, and into bed. I immediately curl as a croissant.

The blanket wettens. The nurse closes the door. They've learned not to ask about the lights. I prefer the dark.

I'm carried towards something like sleep. I dream about fire. I dream about my body and my dad. Best of all, I dream of nothing. Enveloped by nothingness.

As promised, I'm taken to the cancer ward. This is a huge relief. My new room is directly behind the nurses station. They all watch as I'm pushed in. There's a collective sigh.

"There you are," one says.

"We didn't know what to expect reading your file," another laughs.

"Yeah, you look like a big sweetheart," the oldest one confirms, "Not a nightmare."

"I only called her that because she was acting like—," I'm interrupted.

"Beep", a loud siren screams.

High pitched and shrill, it rattled my bones. All but one nurse turns. The alarm is coming from my neighbors room. They all rolls their eyes.

“Still haven’t fixed that,” the youngest nurse asks.

“They haven’t even looked at it,” the charge nurse mutters.

“Poor Mrs.XXXXX,” the redhead grabs her chest.

They file out promising to visit me shortly. As the last one slips out, she pauses,

“You have visitors wanting to come tomorrow.”

I’m nauseated. Putrid to the core. “Is this what Sartre meant,” I wonder..

Every two hours, some new test is followed by routine ones. Blood is pulled, saline is pushed, and I sit, staring at the harbor.

I’ve stopped looking at the results. The last one was enough. I recall the numbers.

Lactate dehydrogenase levels, abnormally high. 1600 u/l. Potassium levels, certified bananas. PET scan, glowing like a new mother.

It’s hard to sleep. On the clock, “name, birthday, last bowel movement”. One of the shots feels like a thick rubber band.

It's stretched out to a yard. As they push in, the band is released. It leaves a fist size bruise every time.

I'm in a chair that faces the harbor. For a hospital, it's not a bad view. I can see the Statue of Liberty from here—Ellis Isle too. I'm waiting for XXXX to visit.

My neighbor is an elderly woman. Her window is adorned with cards, flowers, and balloons.

Every time I pass her room, for some reason, we lock eyes. Neither of us has said a word to the other. We don't have to.

Downtown Manhattan looms across the edges of the East River. On the buttermilk channel, water taxis, ferris, and barges are storybook in their pastels. Cutting across the setting sun. The water ripples as it's unzipped. Spilling and bleeding colors. More than a reflection of a sunset.

I jump as a sudden “Knock, Knock, Knock” fills the room.

“Here he is,” the sweetest nurse says.

It’s too much to process at once. I haven’t even settled back, as she walks in. My heart drops –fragementing on the floor.

Her presence is light. Her hair shines obsidian and carries a subtle fragrance–home.

She’s struggling to look at me. Head still down, hair hiding her away. I weakly smile.

“Not so bad, see,” I laugh, pointing out to the sea.

She goes to caress my arm. I flinch on instinct. Bruises poke out of the shirt sleeves.

My fingers fumble an apology. Her hand is on top. I watch the scene unfold. Instantly grasping the gravity. This is a goodbye.

We stay in a long embrace. Inhaling one another. I drop the world for but a second.

Imagining an easier life.

In that moment, I realize how fragile she is. Her small shoulders. Lean frame. I can’t do this to her, I think.

“I brought your tea pot”, she shows. Both her and the kettle dressed in all black.

"ha," I cry.

A new doctor and nurse stroll in.

"Is this a good time," he asks.

I wipe away my tears.

"Yeah of course," XXXX says.

He looks at XXXX then me.

"It's fine," I roll my eyes.

"Have you ever had a bone biopsy before or a spinal tap?"

X and I look at each other. Both of our faces stretched back in playful horror. It's so ridiculous we smile.

"Well, you're going to need to get both." He informs me.

My teeth grind at the thought.

"I mean when are we trying to do that?" I ask.

"Right now," he smiles sheepishly while bringing a plastic bag from around his back.

XXXX and I trade wide eyes.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “You probably won’t feel much.”

I feel my whole body shake to the left. Each twist jerks my entire body. The nurse is holding me down. XXXX has stayed. Fascinated.

“One more turn,” he promises.

I swear I hear a scraping sound.

“Ah, there we go”

It was neither a crunch nor break. Rather, a stinging sensation. He pulls the long needle from the marrow. The doctor talks about tests and results at Corneil, as the nurse places bandages.

“Just don’t go running around for a few days,” he laughs.

“Did you get enough,” I ask, still not moving.

“Stay like that for a bit,” the nurse chirps.

"Of course," he says.

"Why do you need my bones?" I manage.

"Ha, " he continues, "Genetic profile...double hit or triple hit. Oh, and to see if it spread to your bones."

"Ah, if I'm going to die or not," I correct.

XXXX sits beside my crumpled form. The doctor leaves. Closing the door as he does.

X strokes my hair with grace and ease. I grab the inside of her thigh. A wave of anxiety pours from my heart. Everything feels slightly off. Like the light is coming from a different star.

My vision swirls. These rotten insides are betraying me once again. Festering phantoms ill at ease.

The sun is rising. A round of residents scurries off. My doctor stays.

"Feeling better," he asks while spying one of my textbooks. The chapter displayed is all about eigenvalues of nodes.

"Much, I can eat!" I happily share. It was true. While I couldn't hold down a meal per se, I can now eat graham crackers and applesauce. A slight miracle.

"Ah, that'd be the steroids. It'll stop once you get home," he warns.

"Home," I raise an eyebrow.

"Yeah, we can't wait any longer for the tests. We're going to start your treatment tomorrow," he sits down for a long conversation.

"So, a week," I repeat, "Then I can go home?"

"Well, no. The treatment is a week long," he clarifies moving his hands as he does so.

"The treatment is just a week," I laugh, "That's nothing."

"No. The first one is a week. As are the other five."

"That seems intense," I whimper.

"Excactly, you're getting intensive chemotherapy. Which means, we need to get a pick in"

As we sit, he explains. There's no point. I'm going to do whatever he recommends.

"We can't do radiation or surgery. It's too mixed in."

"Ok but like how intense is it? Will I be able to work?"

"Maybe, some people can," he supplies.

"Walk my dog?" I shoot.

"Depends," he raises a hand to stop me.

"Some people can work, others can't get out of bed. It really depends" He continues into jargon. Facts and figures, graphs and rate of change. All the stuff I love.

"Ok, but for me. What do you?" I beg.

"You want to know your odds?" He walks to the window. Staring out. "I don't recommend it."

That's not what I asked, I think, but now I can't focus on anything else.

"My odds?" I question.

Leaning on my IV pole, I join him at the window. He knows better than to offer help.

We both look out. I see the horizon. I wonder what he sees.

“For you, 40/60, if it’s just blood cancer” it comes flatly from his mouth.

I stare. That’s the most common portfolio mix. Allowing for growth, and stability. My cancer is a bonafide New Yorker. Smarter than most clients I’ve had. Smarter than me.

“Ok, it could be worse,” I admit.

Dr. Cook turns towards me.

“A man in your position must see a lot,” I state. “Must have seen a lot.” He catches my line.

“The good news, Dead Name, is if it’s going to kill you, it does it quick. You won’t suffer like the others.” He lays bare reality. Truly relieved he could at least provide this comfort.

I had wandered too far from the palace. Now there was only sickness, old age, and death. I search for peace amongst the pieces of my hope.

“At least the odds are in my favor,” I purposely confuse. “I mean if it hasn’t spread to the bones.”

“Look, you’ve got a lot going for you,” he states.

He has light blue eyes. Set against the backdrop of decades of cancer care. This man has seen more deaths than I sunrises.

“You’re young. That makes all the difference.” He confesses. “You’ll be able to handle the best treatment.”

Blankly, I watch the harbor.

“If you were 60 or older, we’d be having a different conversation,” he gestures next door.

“What about the genetic profile,” I demand.

“Ah, that could change everything,” he admits. “But, EPOC does miracles. Even if it is double or triple hit.”

The biopsy hadn’t been enough. The labs came back inconclusive. Or, so I’m told.

Would they tell me?

Everyday, it’s the same routine. A handful of pills, several shots, multiple vital checks, and updates of no new updates.

"I hate seeing you like this everyday," A resident says.

"Yeah, it's kind of fucking with my I head," I dart my eyes to theirs.

I've been here twenty days. They still don't know the genetic profile. It's certainly Diffused Large B-Cell Lymphoma. A *good cancer*, unless it kills you, comes back, spreads to your bones, is double or triple hit, or if the treatment causes a secondary cancer—which was explained as likely.

All possibilities were explained to me several times. The odds for relapse are slightly better.

At about "40% chance it comes back " he had emphasised. "You're young, and that makes all the difference."

Everytime I hear this, I am reminded of my neighbor.

"XXXXX is going to die. Simple because she's older." I think.

This hardly seems fair. She has a line of visitors—every day. So many people love her. Simply put, she is adored. I've taken to isolating, yelling, and hiding who I am.

Every night, her alarm goes off. At least several times. Then, one day. As I peered out into the hallway. Her room is being cleaned. Nothing is left but a woman crying in the hallway.

That same day, a nurse is attacked by a patient. He felt their turn click. Shortly after, his room was sanitized as well.

They always fight. Screaming and yelling into the night. It was not graceful. Instincially, it felt wrong.

Not my neighbor. She left in peace. The only one on the floor to do so.

The yelling is so commonplace. I only notice it when missing. Like the lack of alarm from next door. The silence stings.

It may be only three weeks since being here. Everyday, a new room is cleaned. A few times, I catch them rolling the body bags out.

The smell gives them away every time. It lingers after expiration. Poisoning my mind. Unique and unforgettable.

There's a knock.

Dr. KXXXX comes in. She has the R part of DA-R-EPOCH. I'm first treatment specifically for cancer.

"So, there's an 80% chance you'll go into a seizure with this shot," she says.

I lose it. "Why the fuck would you tell me that" I spit.

I had been combative with her from the start. She's an excellent doctor. I feel lucky to have her. She clearly wants to be the best doctor. It explains why she's here. At this institution, at her caliber.

"Do you have a problem with me," she demands.

I take a deep breath. "I'm sorry," I admit. Putting my soul in voice. "My whole life has fallen apart. I just got calm, and now I'm told I'll probably be having a seizure."

I'm embarrassed. Ashamed really. I keep hurting the ones helping me the most.

I don't tell her she looks exactly like XXXX. I don't tell her I'm trans, and was fired because of it. I don't even mention that I haven't spoken with my family in years, and don't know where I'm going to live. Rather, I give her honesty for the first time.

"I'm scared," I say, "I really don't want to die," I bare to her eyes. Guard down.

We hold gazes for a cycle. Then, a new resident walks in with a smile. Coffee in hand.

"Today's the day," He beams.

"Uhhh, what" I look apathetically

"You're going to get a PICC. Then, we'll start chemo this afternoon."

I stare back at Dr. KXXXX. Something changes in her eyes.

"Can I get something to calm me down," I ask both the doctor and yet another resident.

The doctor smiles, "of course sir."

The resident scoffs. His tone instantly marks him a cunt. "Don't be a baby. It's not that bad. Should only take 10 minutes"

I huff.

The doctor looks unsure. Obviously in a hurry, but wanting the interaction to be natural. She refuses to intervene. For the sake of education.

"Alright," I say, "I'm trusting you."

He laughs at this. Entertained by my approval. I raise an eyebrow. Then place a pending curse on his head. His left arm twitches.

"Why are you even learning this," I shoot. Staring him down.

"What," He says incredulously, "to work, of course?"

"Right, not to help people," I snap, "but why did you pick something that's on its way out," I ask. "Most people get ports."

The female doctor laughs. "Well not for you," She says, "I mean not yet."

"Yeah, because I don't have insurance, assholes," I release the curse.

In preparation for chemo, I started steroids. 100 mg everyday. For context, 40mg a day is considered very high.

"We don't have to," she says. Hands up backing away.

“That’s not fair.” I reply, “and you know it.” I look her up and down. Pinning her to the wall. “I hate too many people to die,” I retort. “Why can’t you just do the port.”

“Not until you’re stabilized,” she says. “They don’t want to risk surgery yet”.

“And it’s not because I’m uninsured,” I demand.

For the sake of getting away from them, I agree to be quiet. There’s a tension in my side.

Both look at my outfit. Then to me. I swear to god they smirk. Or, perhaps I’ve lost my mind.

I’m simply a test for this resident to pass. Nothing more. Not a person with cancer. Not even a person.

The procedure ends up taking five times as long as it should. As he threads a tube from my right arm to my heart, there are several intense situations.

Moments of retracking. Forging new paths. Pausing and discussing. Each movement pierces my flesh. The needle digging in. The tube widening.

The doctor leans in, pointing at the screen. Navigating the needle every millimeter.

Until, finally, it’s placed dangerously near my heart.

There on the screen I see it. Amazed and stunned. A vein, my heart, and now this foreign object. Jutting out into my shoulder, and down my arm.

"That was bad," I say. "Really really bad. You need more practice."

They leave without speaking.

DA-R-EPOCH

“Dose adjusted Etoposide phosphate, prednisone, vincristine sulfate, cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin hydrochloride, and rituximab,” the doctor had explained. Let me translate, or skip like I did.

Prednisone is obviously steroids. Which are 2x daily at 60mg. To keep your body from dying—of course. Mostly, they make me snappy and angry. The price to keep this body afloat while pumped full.

Take for example Hydroxydaunorubicin. It's well known as the Red Devil. Yes, it's bright red, and sucks. It's my least favorite out of them all. The one I feel the most. The one doing most of the killing. It literally hurts my heart.

The vincristine sulfate is a race of sorts. It prevents cells from dividing. Essentially ensuring no new cancer cell growth. This would be fabulous, but it works on all cells dividing quickly. Cancer or not. Most know that it causes nerve damage, but that's an alive person's worry. Who cares about dexterity when you can't eat.

Cyclophosphamide helps prepare one for stem cell transplant. For me, currently it's used to wipe my bone marrow clean. Better to just start over, don't you think?

As the sulfates do for the vincristine, so too does phosphate for Etoposide. These prefix chemicals help break down, and carry the drugs. In a nice orderly, and evenly dispersed manner.

Important, as these drugs dosed just a bit up can kill. Etoposide stops cell division. In turn, causing hair loss. It's the reason I have no eyebrows or lashes. The reason my face is so smooth and lovely.

The last one is interesting. Rituximab kills all B-cells. As an immunotherapy, it marks B-cells for the immune system. Once cells are tagged, your body kills them. Cancer or not, they die.

"About 80% of people have a bad reaction on the first dose." My resident tells.

"Why the fuck would you tell me that," I throw.

She turns, eyes awake for far too long,

"What's your problem with me?" she glares.

I take a breath. Let it sink down.

“I’m sorry,” I let my eyes confirm, “I just got calm, and now you’re saying I’ll most likely have a seizure. Does that make sense?” I ask softly. Adding, “Thank you, you’re saving my life.”

My heart flutters and spurts. Changing rhythm several times. I’m supposed to tell them, but I don’t. I have a nurse assigned to sit with me for the infusion period. I’m done guessing if I’m alright or not.

Afterwards, my entire body is on fire. Every time I piss, chunks of tumor spurt out. I’m waiting for XXXX to pick me up.

I’m not allowed to leave alone. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. I can manage short walks. Perhaps 10 feet. After that, I need support. My body gets too heavy. Fingers, too clumsy.

Worse yet, a fog of confusion has set in. Events are jarred and jagged. Leaving me constantly nauseous. Not one moment fits with the next. Everything is abrupt. A piece of a piece—whiplash.

She's been texting. Asking when I can leave. There's a show tonight. A friend from out of town.

"I don't know. I'm on hospital time." I reply. "I'll get someone else. It's not a big deal".

It was the biggest deal.

"No" is the reply. I don't read the paragraphs which follow.

I don't tell her that I might not even be able to leave. That was still being decided. I have no say. I'm just a passenger.

The nurses are working furiously. Trying to get a life saving shot *for me*. The doctor tells me it's over \$10,000. I don't know why.

Without it, I'll get infections. Then, more than most likely, I'd die.

"That's how most people go. It's rarely the cancer that takes them." the doctor says.

"If I can't get it," I ask.

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it." He orders.

"That means I'll have to stay," I give in.

He goes on to explain what has happened to me. My immune system is destroyed.

Non-existent. Neutropenic he says. It sounds more cosmetic than life threatening.

For seven straight days, I was infused with chemicals. They promised to either save, or kill me. Regardless, the next round would be stronger. If I'm lucky.

That's the DA part of DA-R-EPOCH. My treatment course. *Dose Adjusted*. Meaning, each week long chemo session will be ratched up to my body's limit.

The idea is simple. The more poison a body can handle, the more likely it'll kill all the cancer cells. A single cell survivor could end me. Starting everything over, but with different odds.

The nurse walks in. I'm staring out the window. Swaying back and forth. Watching the tide.

"Looks like it's your lucky day," she smiles.

I grin ear to ear. I'm given a shot. I swear there's a loud "bang" as my entire arm is slammed. Vibrating my bones.

"Take a claritin when you get home," The nurse says.

"What," I laugh.

"It'll help with the bone pain. We don't know why, but it works."

"Weird," I slowly hum out.

The doctor comes in.

"Well, she's here," he informs me.

I turn white. Look down the hallway. My chest drops.

As she helps me to the elevator, I wave goodbye. To my utter surprise, all the nurses stop. They clap, holler, and cheer. My legs become hollow.

Several come up and hug me goodbye. The red head demands I eat healthy. She had just spent forty days nursing me from the edge.

"No more of that garbage honey, promise,"

I smile,

"I don't even look like I have cancer," I wink.

"Ding"

We hold gazes for a second. The doors slide open. My room is already being filled.

We step in the elevator. Sink down to the lobby. Then, for the first time in over a month, the *wind*.

It caresses my face. I don't remember the cab ride. As we got out, however, a car behind honked. XXXX got out and kicked the front right headlight. Breaking it with her combat boots.

My neighbours laugh.

"Sometimes you gotta kick a car," They agree.

The car drives away. I'm helped out. XXXX carries my bags.

As soon as I open the front door, I drop to my knees. Estelle is all wiggles. I break down completely.

"I'm sorry," I say between deep sobs, "I don't know why I'm crying."

"It's ok," XXXX assures between her own. "I get it".

“What are you going to do?” she cries out.

“Not your problem,” I repeat, “Just help me with my medicine, and go to your show.”

I had been distancing myself from her since she got back. Ignoring, wouldn’t be incorrect. We’re stuck in-between romance and reality. Both are crumbling fast.

“I don’t know,” my voice charges harshly.

“Come live with me. I’ll take care of you” she offers. “ I think it’s for the best.”

I want nothing more than this. It’s an answer to some many problems. Like, where am I going to live, or how will I take care of myself. Most of all, I still love her. I have no control of my heart. I wish it weren’t true.

I look at her faintly. Darting my eyes back to the ground. "You don't love me as trans," I force out.

It comes out against everything inside me. I catch it too late. It's clearly the final nail.

We're both shocked. Silence buzzes as the air charges. I can smell the power in the air. A strong spark and,

"Thank you," she whispers in tears. Head down too. Just having heard, it strikes me as truth.

My stomach drops. I feel hot and cold at the same time. I start to shake.

"You should get going," I manage. "Have fun at your show."

"It's too late," she informs, "I was never going to make it".

As she turns to leave, I grab her arm, and pull her close. It's undeniable, but inevitable.

Soft, but firm. This isn't going to work.

Then, just as suddenly, I let go. She holds the embrace a few seconds more. Then, she slides away. Out the door. To the street. Gone.

It feels so wrongly right. I'm alone now. I feel my insides burning up. Until, there's nothing left.

I reach for my pills. More steroids and a mustard looking sauce. For what, I've forgotten. The nurses had packed little wooden spoons. I laugh.

I try to make dinner—and fail. I simply can't. My body lacks bone and muscle. I'm pulled to sleep. Yet, land in a nightmare.

It's a hot sleep. Full of tossing and sweating. No rest to be found. Yet, no earthly consciousness to speak of. Both deep and shallow, I turn. Prisoner to the night.

I'm deep in this dream. Completely swallowed. There is no other reality. Only this one. The entirety of the city has been destroyed. Sand blasted red, orange, and black. Not a building stands.

Foundations extrude in jagged form. As the wind twists and howls. There is no one left. Only myself. Removing any ideas of being lost. As there is no one to find.

I look around. More of the same. I walk, calling for all to hear. There's no reply. Just the echoes and wind.

Then it hits. This is it. That's all.

The shock of it all sends me spiraling. Right back up into my body. I awake drenched, but the nightmare continues—strengthens even. A sharp stab in my abdomen.

Somehow, I feel worse than when I went to bed. The doctors said it's a cumulative process. Hunched over, I crawl to the bathroom.

Estelle is whining in the corner.

"You're such a good girl," I quite literally cry.

The clock reads half three. The roaches in the kitchen scurry as the light flicks on.

There's no food in the kitchen. No meals to be had. I've been gone so long, they made it home.

I look down at Estelle. Thankfully, her bowls are full. We leash up, and I trudge to the stairs.

As I reach for the door, I throw up. Collapsing back to the floor. I stuff my wet face into her fur, and let go.

I cry like a newborn. Shitting myself as I do. I cry for my mother. I cry for all the pain I caused and all the pain to come. This is just the beginning. One out of six. Possibly eight or more.

Estelle uses the bathroom. She goes on the mat. Clearly ashamed. Still on the floor, I give her praise. She prances over, and I kiss her. Life and death be damned.

I lay there a few minutes more. Until, nothing is left. Just the floor. Then I cry some more. Dry and silent, laying into heaving. Estelle licks my face.

I go to push her away. I literally have no immune system. I'm not allowed to be around animals. As I do, my hand catches in my hair.

A full strand glides out with ease. Leaving a patch. I place it with the others.

At this moment I understand. This is my reality. I don't go back to sleep. I can't. The only job I have, I can't do. It haunts me.

For the second time, I mutter, "For Estelle," and pull out my phone. I know this number by heart too. There's no ring.

"Dead Name," she says worried and cracked.

“Hey, Mom, it’s been a while.”

She arrived not 12 hours later. Traveling through six different states. Granted, one was Delaware.

“I can’t help you park. I’m sorry,” I say.

“It’s alright, I’ll be there soon,” she replies.

If I wasn’t dying before, I am now. No one in my family has seen where I lived. Not for years. Now, she was going to be immersed.

I don’t get to pick where I die. This feels a bit different, I admit. I’m being forced to leave. The door buzzes. I answer.

Hands shake as my heart pounds. Frequent skips have become normal. I don't tell my doctor, because they'll stop the treatment. A knock at the front.

Clumsy hands grasp the knob. Fumbling as they go. Slowly at first, then all at once, everything pours in. On first sight, she cries.

"My god," she gasps, "you're".

"Hey," I start. Then I'm wrapped in an embrace. This is the first positive touch since before cancer.

Until now, it's been stabs drawing blood, punctures letting poison, and the bi-hourly impaling. Julius Caesar has nothing on me. PICC or not, I had become a pin cushion.

I welcome her in. It's a railroad apartment. Windows on either end. Small, but cozy.

Well decorated, and modestly clean. Akin to a witches cabin.

It's not even mine. Technically, I'm homeless. My XXXXX has been letting me stay. Ever since I called off the wedding.

I came out to them second. Since then, they have taken care of me. Graciously as my life fell apart. Offering their home while on sabbatical.

Theme/buildup everything is leaving me too

Haircut

Estelle and I are leaving. She stares at me the whole time. From the stoop to the car, we hold each other. She sees me cry. Then, licks my face.

With my heart safely encased, they wave. My legs tingle, my chest pulls me forward, yet thoughts are clear. Just a ringing. A singular truth. In a blue sedan, they roll off. Leaving me behind.

A construction crew to my left watches. They are all smoking. I turn and curse. Surly, a strange thing to behold. Virginia tags, a Shiba screaming, and then a bald something yelling.

The anger doesn't dissipate. It grows. Singing about hunger and pain. It burns in my heart. I let it smolder.

I go inside the vestibule. Climb the first flight. Taking a glance at the oil portrait of the old owners.

From the Gilded era, the painting is absolutely horrid. The proportions are off. His mustache looks like a squirrel. The wife tops out at four feet. Both are too round for their limbs. I laugh, and thank them.

This building has sheltered me. Like any true New Yorker, I can't imagine leaving this abusive relationship.

I unlock and push open the broken door. Silence smacks me. No pitter-patters, wagging tails, or whines. Just reality.

I reach and pour a cacophony of pills preorganized. I shiver as I take them. It takes two separate gulps to get them all.

I let rejection press me to sleep. A boxing match I loose. Tossing and turning, I awake-sweaty. Angry at the world.

I pack what fits into a bookbag. This isn't my first time. Pieces of a high pitch ringing. I've lived out of a bookbag for most of my twenties. This is just another escapade, I sooth myself.

XXXXX had cleaned. Then my Mom had too. There's so much I have to leave.

A painting in the corner, a laser carved plaque behind the couch, and books everywhere. I set the titles on the corner. In five minutes, all are gone. I'm tickled at my own taste. Confirmed by my neighbors.

I suffer from straining. I'm bed-ridden the rest of the day. I can't cook or eat. I sleep through a dreamless dream. Nothing.

When I awake, I'm worse than before. Bones are crumbling, sweats are a fact, and nausea is actually preferred. A strange twist of fate.

"I don't want my dog to watch me die. It's not right", I tell myself. "I did the right thing. I can't take care of her. I can't even eat." I recite in short panicked breaths

I take more pills. As I do, there's a vibration. I already know. I grab my bookbag. Struggling with its weight.

I look for Estelle. I look for our leash. My heart drops.

I walk out without ceremony. I don't bother to look around. Once in the cab, I zone out. Headphones on and music off. There's nothing to say.

I don't want to throw up. So, I look down at the floor. I'm headed to Laguardia. Terminal D. It's new. Built just in time for Covid. Like my cancer.

I had asked the doctors for anti-anxiety pills. This was the only time I asked to take them back. My father and I are the same age. He died in a plane crash. It was June. He was 34.

I'm 34. It's June. I'm about to fly. I really shouldn't.

The window for travel, however, is rapidly closing. With a dress, mask, and shaved head, I manage to confuse everyone.

In the security line, I'm given a wide berth. I don't feel like I look sick. With a mask on, and no communication, I pass. I think.

I land at O'Hare. I walk straight to the cabs. It's cooler here. With a nice breeze. The lake is robin's egg blue.

Last time I was here, I didn't have cancer. I had a job, a partner, and most of all a future. Now, I'm headed towards my nieces. Candy in a bag.

When I arrive, they're excited. All bouncing and curls.

"Where's your sister," I ask XXXX.

"Why are you wearing a dress," XXXX replies.

“Because I look pretty in it,” I reply.

She looks me up and down, “Yeah, you do,” she agrees. “Want to see my stuffies before XXXX gets back from school?”

“Ha, sure,” I giggle.

She tells me all about her little life. The big adventures in Pilsen, loud sounds in the Loop, and the tall people on the El. She is missing her two front teeth. Whistling as she talks.

“Do you want some of my Mom’s make up,” XXXX asks.

“What,” I ask amused.

She goes under her bed. Emerges chest first. She looks up at me. Doing a final check of approval. I seem to have passed.

“She gave these to me,” She states matter of factly. Eyes peering from the corner. She hands over blush, eyeliner, and lipsticks.

“Ha, ok,” I assure her. “Thank you so much.”

“Dead Name,” She stares up.

“Yeah,”

“Why are you staying here?” she asks, concerned.

“Well, you talked to your Mommy right?” I ask softly.

Looking down, she mutters, “She said you’re really sick, and that we have the best doctors”

“That’s right,” I confirm, “and I got the best of the best. She says I have to eat children to get better,” I wink.

We both laugh.

“How about a snack,” I say?

North Western overlooks Lake Michigan. The nurses here are different. Heavier, slower, hesitant.

DOX

It's better not to count the rounds. There's a pattern. One week in, two weeks stabilize.

All my friends are in New York. So, my weeks in the hospital are long. Uninterrupted and unpunctuated save by the changing of I.V bags.

Red dry circles have appeared under my eyes. I spend the 4th of July in the hospital.

Watching the fireworks over the lake.

My father's death day comes and goes. Unceremoniously, just another day. No larger meaning. No synchronicities. I keep living. He keeps being dead.

I walk the perimeter daily, because I don't want a stroke. Stop moving and my body might get the wrong idea. Movement keeps us alive, the nurses told me. I'm convinced.

Those I see in the hallway, make it. Those who don't, don't. Those of us on the same cycle, watch each other disintegrate—forming into shadows.

I pass a cursed room. An unlucky odd number in the corner. I've seen two people leave this room in bags. Now a third.

'Fuck, she died,' I ask the nurse station.

'What makes you say that?' she smiles back.

I point. There's a large crowd crying in the room. The door is wide open. There is no patient. Only family. I point at the empty bed. My face is flat. I don't mention the smell. It always lingers after the fact.

It's hard to feel anything. She was already so old. The extended family is in the hallway now. No-one has a mask on. They're in front of the nurses station. Right next to me.

The nurse won't, so I do. I look them in the eyes. Red I.V. poll in hand. I slide over.

'Sir, you need to put on a mask.'

'What,'

'Sir, you're in the cancer ward, sir.'

'my Mother just—'

'Right, and we don't want to end up like her.' I widen my eyes and mouth.

The nurses watch. The man puts on a mask. Confused into compliance. Then he heads back into the room full of family and friends. Taking a double look, I move on. He shuts the door.

A nurse thanks me. I glare back. Holding in what I want to say.

At this point all hair is gone. I'm a legitimate banshee. No eyelashes, just a round prednisone face with deep sunken eyes.

Open sores fester in my mouth. Each vowel hurts. So my speech is limited. Saving me from embarrassing myself. Ensuring whatever I say is charged.

I trace the outline of the ward. A group of residents blocks the hallway. My walking path. My recovery.

'Hey yo,' I yell.

A few look. They're confused, wavering back and forth.

'Hello, *doctors*' I repeat.

The head doctor pauses. He looks at me, and then his students.

‘Can we help you, sir?’ he asks.

With that, I unsheathe. Again, I’m in my green dress. It has pockets.

‘I doubt it, if you can’t realize you’re blocking the hallway.’

The residents drink in their surroundings. Finally noticing where they are at. That this building is full of other people. As if they just internalized the hospital.

They part. Hugging the walls. None of them look at me. None of them speak to me.

They’re all beautiful. It makes it that much worse.

‘Anything else,’ he asks, eyes rolling.

I want to be better. I don’t want to be an asshole. Yet, there’s an undeniable pull. I love yelling at doctors. They really need it in my opinion. Spare the nurses, for they’re saints.

‘You could stop being a cunt, and do your job’ It flies out. I doubt I had a choice. I doubt I’d have chosen better.

I don't wait around for a reaction. This is the most alive I've felt since dying. Every resident acts like they're a victim of the system. I spit that in their face. You are the system. It's time for more steroids.

Another round of freshly minted residents is visiting. There was no notifications. They just show up when they want, with how many they want, and all, as I've been saying, are strangers.

"How are you," the old male doctor waves.

"I'm great," I smile. I'm sitting in the sunlight. Catty-corned by two windows. Watching the lake below. Taking in what I could.

"What are you," the residents ask.

"A fucking human," I offer. This is the second time I've been asked that.

"Oh," he returns confused,

"Why great," the teacher redirects.

I take a breath. I want to feel good when I lay my head down. I also can't hold my tongue.

"Well, I just took an edible. It's been a mira—"

"You can't do that," two doctors say. One steps forward. I assume it's her turn for assignment. How unlucky I think.

"What, should I take the opiates you all dole out?" I scoff.

The atmosphere shrinks. Electrifying every moment. I'm given space. Probably for reconsideration. I don't. I come back to the conversation. Leaving me head. Taking the truth with me.

"“But I'm a doctor,” she says for the seventh time. As if this would snap me back to sense.

"You're a stranger," I repeat. Widening my eyes every time.

"But, you can't take marijuana," she huffs. "It's, it's not—".

"I already did, and will again," I interrupt. "It's literally in my bag. Do you want to see?" I ask.

She continues, "It's not allowed. Because of insurance."

"Then escalated it," I stare. "I really don't give a fuck."

The teacher interjects, trying to reign control. "Ok, why do you prefer this drug over wha—".

"You'll get me hooked on oxies, make me a goddamned junkie, but have issues with cannabis. You're all fucking idiots." I pontificate aloud. "Dr. Dumbasses."

"Oh, ok, ok," he raises his hands. Turning around he ushers out his students.

"Think before you speak," I shout as a farewell, "I was doing great until you all came."

I feel terrible as the door shuts. The next few days, I make sure to leave every morning. I hide in a visitor room. Until the residents finish their rounds.

No doctor knows my spot. I doubt they've ever been here. In fact, this room is almost always empty.

I walk back, pole in hand. Red bag glimmering in the fluorescent lighting. I flick the I.V. to stop the beeping.

"That's what I like to see," a nurse says, winking at me.

“What,” I giggle.

“Using that pole to keep you steady. Using it as a cane.” She is absolutely beaming.

As I turn the corner, I see her. The doctor I yelled at the other day. She is looking around. Talking to the nurses by my room.

“Fuck,” I think. Then head over.

“I just wanted to say,” she continues, “that I’m sorry.”

“What,” I ask, taken aback. Not many people apologize to me. It’s feels, wrong.

“You’re a responsible patient. I didn’t mean to treat you like you weren’t.” She is genuine in her approach. Head lowered, eyes raised, and heart open. Honestly, this is the most gracious act I’ve seen.

“What was I supposed to do,” I ask sincerely, “I don’t want to be a dick!” I confess.

“Hmmm,” she ponders, “You could just lie about taking it.”

My face goes flat. All straight lines.

“That’s stupid,” I say, “Why would I lie to my doctor.”

"You're right," she admits. Face scrunched trying to solve the problem at hand.

"You're not good at this," I say.

"Wait, why," she asks to my surprise.

Honesty for honesty, I partake in a fair trade.

"I'll never see you after today." I impart what little I've learned. Kindness was the first to die from chemo.

"What, don't say that," she laughs it off.

"Why, it's true." I say, "You won't know if I'm dead in a month or not. You'll be at some different hospital."

She has nothing to say. It's true, and not her fault. It's also not mine. That's the way hospitals work. Let's not pretend that I'm nothing more than I am. A chapter in a textbook. To be crammed in with other *diverse* patients.

With that, she leaves. The nurses stare disapprovingly. I stare back. I never see her again.

"I really don't like the residents," I wink at the nurse.

I head back to my room. Stare out the window. For hours, just a silent deep stare. Past the horizon. I can't lay down yet.

The sun sets. Now I can sleep. I must be getting better. They only check on me every four hours now.

I'm told that the genetic results never came back. I sign some papers for a few studies. If I can't physically help, at least on paper I can.

I check my phone. There are no new messages. I check my email. There are new bills.

Only two more days. Then round four is over. Then we see how big the tumor is. We find out if the chemo is working. I mean, it's working on me. Degrading my body.

That's no guarantee it's got the cancer. Sometimes, I was told, it's just tricky like that.

Each previous round was weaker than the last. The doctor says we're pushing it up. I'm glad she doesn't frame it as a choice. I need her to take charge.

She is saving my life. I hate her at the same time. Every dose increase is felt vividly. It's gotten to the point where I just stare. No thoughts, no peace, just staring out a window.

"Do you want some advice," she asks.

"Absolutley not," I reply

"If you want better treatment you should be nice," she says.

I raise the left side of my upper lip in disgust.

"Everyone has problems," she continues, "today in my car at the starbucks line."

A low resonance high pitched 'eeeeee' rings through my head. Vibrating my teeth.

Proudly, she espouses, "When I worked at a private hospital, we'd give the patients experimental drugs to help pay—"

"That's fucked up," I choke.

"Wait, what, it was still medicine," she protests.

"If you aren't providing what you know works best, it's ethically immoral," I stammer.

"That's really messed up, you did it for money."

Twitching my right eye. I haven't blinked in a minute. She is still talking to herself. On and on her blonde head bobbles. Light and free, it bounces easily. Finally, she wraps up.

"I really want to open a flower shop," she smiles. "Rather than work here."

"You should go do that," I drily deliver. "Like now. You might die sooner than you expect".

She looks at me. Neck recoiling back. She goes to open her mouth

"Bye," I say before she gets a chance.

She reconsiders, and then leaves. A thought stuck in her throat. Not mine to choke on.

"She'd probably be great in a flower shop," I admit.

I'm alone the rest of the day.

I'm a vampire now. The sun hurts. My skin is ruby red around my eyes. These bones ache while neuropathy takes coordination, balance, and perception. Each bump a bruise.

I have no hair. No eyelashes, no pubes. not even an eyebrow. My piss is even red. It's certified radioactive. Or something, I'm not allowed to share toilets.

I can't wear makeup. It slides off. My face is round, which I love. Otherwise, I look and act like a hairless cat.

Finally, the last day is here. I finish off the red devil by four AM. I've drained the Rituximab by noon. Now, it's time for my least favorite part.

After seven straight days of infusion, I'm told to go to a different building. It's full of people and their families. Midwesterners from god knows where. Most of them are larger than two New Yorkers and a dog.

Through a sea of red hats, stares, and bleach blonde hair, I wait in my green dress. I wear it every shot session.

"You're a piece of shit lady," I point at her exposed face.

She goes on about how no-one can make her.

"I hope you get cancer you dumb bitch," I spit and walk away. I'm lugging a bag on my back.

No-one seems to know what to do. So, they do nothing.

The needle from my chest is removed. My port is bandage. The shot given. I leave.

The street is bright. Not as loud as home, but so much brighter. I see my cab. I climb in.

"Do you mind putting your mask on," I ask the driver.

He turns around with a huff. Eye's electric voice ready to strike. He, however, takes one look at me and says,

"Oh,".

"Yeah, sorry. I don't have an immune system."

"My mother dies of cancer," he says. His eyes have softened. They're a brilliant brown.

Reflecting the light in orange hues.

"I'm sorry, what type was it," I ask.

"Blood cancer," he shakes his head, "What type do you have?"

"Oh, blood cancer." I reply

We drive the rest of the way in silence. I'm dropped out in front of my sister's house.

Nobody is home. What a gift.

I don't want to talk. I don't want to be around strangers. I don't want to be seen.

I want to shower. I want fresh clothes. I want company. There's none.

I'm hot and cold. Sores swell up in my mouth. They're open blisters. One moment I'm constipated. The next, I'm not.

Once cleaned, I lay. There's a message. It's text.

"Hope round 3 was good," it reads. "I'm working with your favorite XXXXX. You'd love it."

I drink it in. There's a gulf. No round of chemo is *good*. No call is worse.

"I don't think I can talk to you during this," I write back.

To my surprise, she responds immediately.

"I don't want to talk to you ever again." she sends.

I laugh. It's so ridiculous. That's normally my job.

"Why," is my response.

She never responds. That's the last I ever hear from XXXX.

Alone, in a stranger's home, I pass. Into the dream world. Where my body is free.

Where my life isn't rotting. Where I'm me, and not alone.

"At least I have one of those," I drift to sleep.

I'm in an airport. Waiting to get through security. That's it.

That's all I dream about. It's still a relief. I wake up hopeful. Reality pushes it out. My body captures the soul. I'm bound.

There is no greater movement. No change in tempo. There is only not dying. Then, repetition. As soon as I feel better, it's the next round.

Each cycle gets worse. Each time I get quieter. Slowly, my fire fades. Some days I talk so little my lips glue together. I have to pry open for every interaction. Each word bounces off sores. So, the words become fewer. I'm a much easier patient.

Whatever is left isn't me. It's bone and skin. It's hairless.

By round six, I can't feel excitement. I don't feel anything. I'm aware of the slamming in my chest. Of the push of a needle. How it slides. Where it locks in place.

There's a taste of saline. Starting from my nose, it goes into my mouth. The nurse is pushing hard. There's a thump.

Cool water flows into my heart. Bright red blood flows out.

"Perfect," she smiles, eyes gleaming.

I blankly nod. She tapes my breast. I button my shirt. Then I'm wheeled away. I don't correct them anymore.

There's a tube. It hangs from my chest. It'll be here all week. Until I leave.

I'm placed on a new floor. It's much quieter. To my delight, there aren't any residents.

This is the refractory ward.

For whatever reason, unbeknownst to me, I'm placed here. Amongst those whose cancers relapsed. Most on this floor are getting stem cell infusions. The last line of defense before death.

The majority of patients here have hair and look plump. It takes months to recover from CAR T-cell treatment. The next few weeks predict success. If the side-effects don't kill you, it still may not work. Regardless, it's a miracle treatment. Saving another 30-40% from dying.

Another batch of nurses come in. They're wearing plastic suits. In the cart, there's my red bag. I'm hooked up. Tubes merged. Rate of flows, check.

"Why am I here," I ask the group of strangers.

They make eyes at each other.

"Everyone knows there's a nurse shortage," I continue.

"No, it's not that. I mean the nurse bit is true, but you're here because all the rooms are full." A blonde nurse tells me. She looks like a mother. Tired and at her limit, but still empathetic.

"Damn, the first thing you learn when you get cancer, is that everyone has cancer," I say.

The nurses giggle too.

“Oh yeah sure,” another nurse jumps in, “there’s absolutely been an uptick.”

The older nurses nod in agreement. When all but one nurse remains, I wave her over.

“Hey, you all forgot one thing.” I cringe.

“Oh god, your Zofran.” She clasps her forehead.

“Yeah, I’ll be puking everywhere without it.”

“What’s wrong,” the charge nurse pops in.

“Oh, she reminded me that I forgot her Zofran.” she says.

I beam. A ray of sunshine pushes out my heart.

“It’s no big deal,” I relay, “I should have asked earlier.”

The head nurse cocks her head. She looks at me for the first time.

“Need anything else honey,” the charge nurse asks

After they leave, I cry. A body shaking cough filled cry. That night I dream. I fall deep into myself. So far I come out the other side.

I dream of a woman's voice. A gift given to me. A lightness.

"Lila", she keeps calling me until I wake.

I look the name up. Smiling as I read. Then, it's back to linoleum, fluorescent lighting, and disinfectant. I take a playful spirit into the day.

I wait for the bag to empty. It's a divine process. Taking nearly all day. Just as the machine starts to chirp, the nurses repeat the ritual. Punctual as usual.

Plastic garbs dawned. Another bag brought in a suitcase, another flow check, then another beep. On and on. Until a week passes by.

The machines aren't the best. I constantly open them up. Pulling out the IV.

I flick, flick, flick, until all the bubbles break up. I'm supposed to call a nurse for this.

Who has time for that? Nearly every half hour, I repeat the beeping ritual.

In my sleep, I do it with one hand. Only needing my eyes to ensure bubbles are gone.

It's oddly comforting. An unwritten rule. Don't weigh nurses down with minutiae. I like to tease them about this. Knowing full well no-one can speak the truth here.

I'm aware, but I don't feel. I don't listen to music. I don't call or text. I don't scroll. I simply stare.

My youngest sister is getting married today. Everyone is in Richmond. The last bag has arrived. With it, my doctor's assistant. This is the first time I've seen her while being infused. I can't place why, but it puts me off.

"She deals with dying people, students, and families, everyday," I remind myself. Despite chemo side effects, I'm on the up and up. Quite literally my body is at its weakest.

"Your blood work is looking great. I mean you're neutropenic, but we expect that." she continues. It's like being read a bedtime story. "And you're probably anemic now."

"Ha, my grandfather was anemic," I recall.

"The PET scan determines what's next." she finishes, "I'm going to be honest with you. Most people find recovering more difficult."

"Really, are they crazy," I ask.

"Well, things are still going to be hard, really hard, and a lot of your support is going to think this is the end." She looks at me. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I've got an amazing therapist," I assure her.

"You really do," she comments. "Big difference from rounds 2 to 6." She smiles and puts her hand on my shoulder. "I wish all our patients did." she sighs.

"Right," I skate over, "What about starting HRT?"

She stares confused. So, I continue.

"I've been in contact. The endocrinologist won't release it until the oncologist signs off. They said this was a new problem for them. One they hadn't had before."

My head is down. I'm being told "No" by people who give less than a minute's thought.

"What," she cocks her head.

"Hormone replacement therapy," I explain. "Because I'm trans gender," I space out.

"Ah, right, probably not until after chemo. Your body is going through enough. If I were you-."

"So, can we stop after this round," I interject hopeful.

"No," she sighs, "We need to make sure we kill every single cancer cell. A single one could start this whole process over again."

"Right," I agree, "I don't like that, but it makes sense." I nod.

There's a lump in my diaphragm. My head is hollow and spinning.

"So, how many more," I ask.

"Well, at least two more." she explains, "then, we'll see what the pet scan says."

"Why do you want to start now," she asks.

I look at her. A thin layer of water stretched over my pupil.

"So I don't kill myself." I admit. "I'm trying to save a life in a body I hate." I pause,

"And clearly, my body hates me back."

She pauses in the doorway. Hand clasped on corner. Back facing me. Shadows sprawl on the wall. Down to the floor. Her darkness meets my absence. There's an exchange.

In that brief pause, we shared a breath. "Your transition is your responsibility. Ours is to keep you alive."

She's right, obviously. It doesn't take the sting away.

"Imagine," I laugh, "Killing yourself after surviving cancer."

She turns. Serious eyes dart in my soul.

"It's more common than you'd think." she informs me.

As she leaves, I ask, "how likely is it I'll relapse? After all this I mean"

"You," my doctor stops. She looks me up and down. Then stares at her papers,

"40 percent chance." She doesn't miss a beat. "This is why we're doing two more rounds."

"Awesome." I say in the empty room.

I already know it'll be stronger. More potent. The red, a little deeper. The bounce, gone.

There is despair. Two more rounds are impossible. I cry at the thought. How much more will I be broken? How much can I take? What is this costing.

NED

Add dinner delivered guy story

The last bag is emptied. With that, I finish. Chemotherapy is over—for the foreseeable future. Round 8 demolished. As am I.

I wished I could skip ahead from six to eight like this. Truth be told, it was the same. An increase in chemotherapy. Plagued with cumulative effects, and staring. The inability to engage. A spiral tightening in on itself.

There are no bells. Not for blood cancer. She lays in wait. Sleeping in your body. Perhaps coming to play in several years or days. No way to tell.

As I'm told over and over,

"Just because we can't see it, doesn't mean it isn't there," and, "see you next week."

There's mention of five years of scans and follows up.

"The good news," I'm told, "After two years, relapse drops significantly." A resident smiles.

“Right, what about refractory cancers,” I shot back.

There are no balloons. No phone calls, or texts. No cheering this time. Not a single smiling face. Least of all no hugs. I’m not in New York. There’s no one to refuse.

I’m in the midwest. Where the people are cold. Frozen smiles sit on top of fire. For many, I’m the first full fledged faggot they’ve met. Not even my doctor comes to say goodbye.

Rather, there’s an empty room. There’s a transwoman in a green dress. She is hairless. Her frame is bent. Eyes sunken and red.

There’s a ruffle towards the hallway. I look. Hoping but not believing.

The blonde nurse who forgot my medicine is watching. She’s leaning in the door frame. Her face is puffy and pink. She goes to speak several times. Catching her voice on the third.

“I, I hate to see this,” she says. Giving me a weak smile.

I smile back. “You can’t think like that.” And this is true. When weak appear strong.

We hold the moment together. There aren't words for synchronized thought. The application would be heresy. Rather, there's a knowing. A look, a twitching grin. I finally found my ally. Now, it's time to leave.

"Thank you for not letting me die," I end with a smile.

Then, I walk out of the room. I turn left at the elevator. Walk down an even larger hallway. Stopping three times for fear of passing out.

Leaning slumped against the wall. Not a soul stops. Several boomers stare. I mouth "fuck you facsist". They scurry off. Hiding in the walls. Clinging to every last year. It's an old feeling to see an eighty year old in front of you at the cancer hospital. It makes one think.

The strength to do chemo. The audacity of prolonging an already long life. Terrible thoughts come. About the drain on resources. The average damage caused by said generation. I've learned to want death. Not for myself.

If the end of your life is spent spreading hate. I would let you die quickly. Sheltering no storm from your being.

What is me, and what are the chemicals is impossible to know. I'm aware I don't want to think this. I, however, feel it. It energizes me. Provides strength where there was none. Hate, very simply, will keep you alive. I'm living proof.

On my last reprieve, there's a cacophony. I'm on a bench. Facing all entries points into this wing.

In the corner, I see an old man yelling at his wife. Grabbing her wrinkled hand. Dragging her to and fro.

"I hope he fucking dies," I mutter to myself. Half shocked, half connecting with our 300,000 year history.

In the middle of the lobby, his voice booms. Echoing the full chambered five stories. He drags her towards the express elevators. My elevators. The cancer express.

I see his body. All the failings of time and inaction. My wish is quite clearly true. In a way it's justice.

In the cancer ward, unsurprisingly, I am consistently the youngest. Not always mind you. Just enough to grate my teeth.

Having a trans woman around all these dying elders is a gift. I think of my sisters and brothers. Most of mine don't die with comfort, doctors, or help. I find no pity for these others. The one's in front of me.

I sit and wait. My ride has forgotten. I let it sink. There's a woman crying to my left. Another man yelling to my right. Residents scurry maskless. No shame. Only pride beaming at "doctor". The irony just about kills me.

"Oh, I thought it was tomorrow." I was told. "Why didn't you say something?"

I don't explain. I don't remind. I hang up the phone. It's the best I have to offer.

So, I watch. Who comes in, and who goes out. Thirty minutes pass. A group of teenage boys wanders in.

"Put on your masks idiots," I yell, "This is a hospital."

The boys scoff, as if I just fucked their mothers. They go to retort, but the crowd has agreed. We all want them to put their masks on. They decide to turn around.

"Thank you," a passing doctor comments, "We're not allowed to, so thank you." she smiles.

The boys have left. Going the way they came. They disappear into the Loop. Silhouetted by the lake. Laughter caught in the air.

There's a text. My ride is outside. I leave as suddenly as I came.

It is jarring. I can't imagine living without the hospital. Without the nurses, and doctors I hate. Without all the homophobia and deeper yet transphobia. I belong here.

It's hard not to feel like I'll be back. This place has claimed me already. As far as I'm concerned, I did die. I offered a willing sacrifice—happily.

On the other side, it's purely me. Everything else has been burned out. A good portion of myself included.

I climb into the car. It smells fresh. The sun is blinding. We drive off. Enter Lake Shore Drive. The horizon disappears. The clouds reflect. I'm skating with both.

"How was it," he asks with a bounce. "Damn, potholes," he mutters.

"Please don't make me listen to your podcast," I huff and then laugh.

"Really," he confesses, face raised.

"I've suffered enough." I grumble. It's half a joke, half true.

I reach for the knob. We ride in silence the rest of the way. It's a quick trip. Even so, I'm impressed I haven't thrown up.

We arrive. My dress silhouettes on the driveway. Dancing with the chalk. I smile deeply. Brightly, it comes and goes. Then I remember. Where I go, loss ensues.

I walk upstairs. I wonder how many people my niece has lost. Simply because I'm trans, and related. How often do kids change friends? What can I do?

I'm tip-toed around. Pride is a family deficit. All too often, it isolates a single beholder. Until, pop.

I open the door. There's a small basket of chocolates and flowers. It's by the queen sized bed I was given. The room is a burnt pink. It matches my skin. Save the room is accented with deep garden greens and golds. I, black and blue.

By all means, the room is beyond comfortable. I lay down in the fertile position. I sweat, shake, and shiver. The blisters begin to appear in my mouth. A new rash on my leg. My fingers are clumsy as ever. The feet, even more so still.

All tingles and buzzing. My insides range from tepid to melting. I feel the poison in every cell. Bloated, expanding, and the detritus.

The next few days see symptoms grow worse. This is the normal case. The majority of the first week after chemo is spent in bed. Then, by the second week, I force a walk. Right when you start to feel better, it's time for another round.

We've stopped at eight. The scan will determine if we go to twelve. I don't think I can make it to twelve. Physically and emotionally, I've spent it all. Naturally, to combat this, I drag myself out for a walk.

Outside is disgusting. The sun is glaring. Bunny rabbits and chipmunks run amok. They frolic even. Finches and Blue Jays sing. I smell fresh grass. The prairie is full of life. Developed or not. She buzzes.

I can't contrast a hospital floor to this. It'll break me. Not until the scan.

As I walk, fall flowers dance with the wind. The air is crisp. After a week indoors, nature stretches out. Shaking my senses. Gripping my body. Shaking it back to me.

I bath, walk, and sleep. This is my new heartbeat. In nothing one finds rhythm. I abandon hope. I find a new routine.

I try to live in the here and now. In a body I don't want. At a place I don't want to be. With a PET scan looming, one day is enough. There isn't much more. For now, it's survival.

I've gone from living minute to minute, to hour by hour, and now, once a week. It leaves me terrified. With no machines to surround me, I'm open.

I've grown to need the hospital. At the very least, what I need is there. In terms of doctors and medicine. As far as support, I'm convinced. I have to go back to New York.

I've heard tales of the Chicago trans scene. I never found it. After two months, I go on a date.

I'm still bald. My eyebrows haven't even started to regrow. I can walk though. For about half an hour. This is as ready as I'll ever be.

We meet in Pilsen. A quaint neighborhood with a vibrant music scene. The Ridgewood of Chicago. My baldness blends nonbinary. Perhaps, even as choice. The irony flattens me. I'm just a rubbery thing.

We head to a tiny tacoria. It's wooden, cramped, and dense. There's a constant flow in and out. Though, only one other group sits. The rest, come and go.

I can't eat anything here. Certainly, not while being out. The possibility of getting sick is too high. The smells, sights, and sounds make it worthwhile. After being so sterile, this is a spectacle. My heart drinks it in. There isn't a single fluorescent light.

The waiter heads towards us.

"Alright, what can I get for you two," she smiles after obligatory midwestern greetings. As she continues, I wonder how much of my life has been spent listening to nonsense. Words being said because they fit in the absence.

My heart flutters. These palms are beginning to sweat. My body hums.

There's a low but persistent shake. I'm never quite still. Like a shark, I'll die.

The waitress gives me a twice over. She asks me again,

"and for you darling," she gives a weak grin. Her eyes darting from the kitchen to me.

"Ah, just a water for now," I gulp it down. "And the mushroom omelet. No cheese please."

I wonder what she thinks as my order is taken.

"Anything else for you, sir," I'm answered.

I simply look past her. Hearing nothing, I watch the birds. I watch the pedestrians. I envy the carelessness in the air. I want to be walking all night. Straight into the morning. Finally, falling into the day.

As I come back, my date is ordering.

“...and can I get the meatloaf, and ummm a glass of whole milk.”

It’s my turn for the double take. “Ha,” I pipe. “You’re funny.” I’m sincere.

This is just the cure I need—bervivty. A joke for a joke. The absurd for the absurd. Yet, I’m just wrong.

I’ve never seen anyone order a glass of milk. I wasn’t even aware meatloaf was sold at restaurants. Let alone a tacoria! I’m honestly too confused. I get caught on the jagged edges.

“Have I really changed that much,” I think, while sipping water.

The conversation ends.

They finish both. The smells, sounds, and textures devour me. I haven't been able to eat. Certainly not like that. The omelet lies perfectly intact. Wallowing in its own juices. Jiggling as it congeals.

"Disgusting," I feel nauseous.

My date eats. There is no talking. So, I wander off. When it's time, we give an awkward goodbye. I dodge.

A cab takes me back to my sisters. Especially deflating. I give the omelet to a man on the street.

"Thanks Mama," he had said. Taking my breath, I glow.

"Not a complete loss after all," I hum, and skip down the street. The moon is full tonight. The sky is clear.

I try to gently brush my teeth, and fail. I look in the mirror shirtless. Pink scars across the top of my right breast. The port still protrudes. My arms have faded to green and yellow. Only the darkest blues remain.

I climb into bed. That night, I drift asleep with my heart full. I dream of the airport again. I'm waiting in a security line. Again, that's the entire dream. A general day time anxiety fills the night.

"At least I'm healthy there," I remark. The other voices protesting.

I ignore phone calls and texts. I stare out the window. I know the birds. Which ones like whom. Which cars they prefer to poop on. I know when the rabbits come. I know that shortly after coyotes will too. I've found the corpses.

In the early morning. Before the nieces wake. A dead rabbit waits for me. At the side door, a plate of blood.

I'm gone.

Largely, I stare out the windows. TV is too much. I'm unable to focus on reading. Strangely, it's only math that begins to make sense.

So much so that I registered for a Fall Course, Network Science. Large on probabilities, which is my life. Markov chains and eigenvectors, magic spells divining life or death.

For the first time in my life, math is easy. I take time with formulas. Let them unravel themselves. I need a framework for the world. A probability level. A way to understand risk. To know how weak I am.

So much of the last year has been "I don't know."

Will I relapse, "I don't know."

The genetic profile of the lymphoma, "I don't know." The results were never conclusive.

Is it double hit? "I don't know."

"What stage is it?"

"I don't know, between two and three," I was told, "Blood cancer is less about stages."

All I know is that my cells are strange. Strange enough to be sent off. Strange enough to stump the best. After all, that's what inconclusive means.

It's science talk for, "I dunno."

Both B and T cells are present in this breakdown. There are more B cells. This means nothing to me. I know better now than to try and research. It's like giving yourself therapy.

Finally, the main thought plagues me. Where will I live?

"I don't know."

The house is empty. School has started. I put on a record.

One early morning, marked by miraculous health, I had a bit of coffee. Just $\frac{1}{4}$ of a cup.

Cut with whole milk. I beam from corner to corner. My sister walks in.

"XXXX, you can stay here you know. For however long you need and want."

I inhale, "I have to start my life again. Does that make sense?"

She stares at her coffee. Looks up over the steam, "You can stay through Christmas at least. Just think about it. The girls would love it."

Then she's off to work, and I do think about it. I head to the dispensary.

I don't have a medical card, but I do have a port. Bald as can be, I enter the medical line.

No-one asks for proof.

"Will that be all for you?" the attendant asks sincerely. She smiles, and laughs with her co-workers while I take it in.

"Don't you get sick of everyone being so nice all the time," I genuinely ask. "It's stifling," I end.

She looks down at me. Tone deeper, the bounce flat. "Not really."

"How do you know," I poke back, "If you never try."

She looks at my ID. Then, she stares where my eyebrows should be.

"Chemothearpy," I nod, "That's why I get the RSO. It's actually a life saver."

"Have you ever thought of staying here," she asks while handing me the bag.

I take it. Then, flick my tongue. "I'd rather die."

"Oh,"

“Not like that,” I say in part with my hands. “I have to go back. It was stolen from me.

Does that make sense?” I grab her hand.

“The doctor said you’re not strong enough yet,” she reminds.

On Halloween week, I set off once again. Too anxious to rest. Too much stolen to listen.

Too stubborn to not.

This is my second plane ride bald. This time, I don’t care about the stares. I put on my mask and headphones. I buckle up my mind.

I’ve found it’s easiest to fall asleep on a plane during take off and ascent. Technically speaking, these are the moments ripe for tragedy. Those transitional phases. Between falling and landing. Taking off, or jumping. A simple matter.

It’s impossible not to think of my father. He was killed during a transitional phase. In Boeing’s rush, a seal was installed backwards. Deadlines were met, and oil leaked out–pooling.

Alarms went off. Then, they were turned off. Thirty minutes later, there’s a change in pitch. Oil floods the engine. Heat does the rest.

Down it went. My father's last actions were spent guiding this metal coffin. Ensuring it hit the only unpopulated area.

In this megacity, which stretches from D.C to Boston, there's hardly a place to crash. Save for the water.

The captain breaks my day dream. He croaks overhead,

"Ahhh, thank you ladies and gentlemen," he stretches on. "The weather is a cool uhhh 68 degrees here in our Nation's capital."

The plane begins its controlled fall.

I look out to my right, and see the Potomac. It's a muddle mass of crabs, oysters, and mud. Sprawling, like great brown twigs reaching for light. Diving up the mid-atlantic.

It is smooth and flat. Hard as concrete at this height. This is where my father died.

Descending from a similar height and age. He was the last one they found.

"That'd be silly," I chuckle. Pulling an edible from my green dress. The one with deep pockets. The one I walked out of every chemo week in. The one XXXX gave me. The one that swirls when I twirl. My first dress.

“At the very least,” I ingest, “I’m not hiding.”

A calm spreads through my shoulder blades. I imagine the plane going silent. Then, a freefall. A sudden drop. Gasps gobbled up by dangling oxygen masks. Pilot and Co, working as one.

The sound of the falling tube grows louder. The river is slushing below. Throwing the sound back up. Bouncing up and down, and up and down, until, nothing.

I hear the tires screech. We are taxied into the D gate section.

“I probably shouldn’t have listened to the blackbox,” I mutter. “Then again, who needs that hanging over their head.”

There’s a series of whirring sounds. My heart beat shakes my body. A dance with rhythm.

It, too, goes up and down, reverberating until it’s nothing. Just an empty spot. Like the hollowness washing over me. I look out at the tarmac.

We deplane. Rather, I’m the first off. The regional smells assault my memory. I hurriedly shuffle to the pick-up area. This is the first time I’ve been back. This is the first

time I've been open here, to my Mom—who is currently pulling up. A blue Toyota crunches to a stop.

I see blonde highlights through the glass. She looks around—eyes passing over me several times. This makes me smile. Finally, I take a step forward. Reaching out, I speak first,

“I'm here Mom.”

DoD

The ride is smooth. I only have to take a single Zofran and close my eyes several times.

Northern Virginia is absolutely beautiful. Rolling emerald hills turn into the jagged blue ridge. The haunting morning dew spills from horizon to horizon. Deepening the forest green. Nursing the flora and fauna.

Even amongst witches, Appalachia is prized. The most ancient mountain range is located in the new world. It's the spine of the east coast. A line that clearly separates while blending with the sky.

I was never from here. I was, however, forced here. Grew up, and left immediately—at 17. Coming back broken but whole was never a blip. My radar, inadequate once again. All false positives until one positive negative.

As my hair grows back, my hope dies. As the sores leave my mouth, it becomes easier to cry. Easier to choke on my own words. I can now spit them out, but I don't.

There is, however, the most magical moment of my life. An expression of true love undeserved. A heart that bends with each wag of tail. A furball angle.

She is all wiggles. Wet kisses, nuzzles, and my hands full. High pitched squeals. From which, who cares. Then, sniffing.

Deep long sniffs as I cry. She licks away my tears. Her fur smells of cotton candy and sunlight. I collapsed on the floor. Tears of joy. Tears of relief. Tears of uncertainty.

Lingering between gratitude a question rises—are we between rounds, or finished?

Before I can't inspect this more, Estelle shows me the house. Zooming from her bed, to her toys, to her favorite place to watch birds. We end where the treats are, laughing.

Estelle ends up gaining a few pounds for the both of us. I try to tell her between waves of guilt.

"I didn't abandon you." I say over and over.

Estelle, very clearly, understands. That night, my Mom makes dinner. I explain how I can't eat meals anymore. Only, small portions. Estelle is in my lap. I'm in her paws.

That night, I slept better than I have in years. When I awake, Estelle is still there. The sun is out. Birds are singing.

The neighbours. Oh, god the neighbours. The immigrants couldn't care less. They're kind and treat my Mom the same. Others don't. Notably the white christians.

They'll pray for me, they said.

I'd rather die, I confirmed.

The dogwalker stopped coming. She even stopped communicating. One day her dad came to the door. I answered.

He walked Estelle. I watched from upstairs. Then, we simply never heard from them again. Could be nothing, could be everything.

You can have a pain so long that eventually, you wonder if it's real. Perhaps, I'm feeling this only in my mind. What a thought. Everything is only in your mind.

My stomach hurts regardless. The food expands a sacred lining. Cradling that which nourishes me. Singing, be patient, please.

Franx

Slowly being more comfortable around mom

Starting HRT/ support/ cafe and vikings cute

Leaving, took 3 times baby!

KET

“This fucking blows”

I can admit it to myself. Here now in the shower. The blanket of water reminds me that all things flow. I don't even know what would make me happy. My heart does, but I don't dare a dream. I can't imagine such things. Not now. I'm in the here and now. With no control. Doing the best I can. I want to be proud of who I am, if I'm going to die. When I die. Cancer or not. Today, it seems like the cancer is back. There are lumps. There is weight loss. There is pain.

I cry violently. Shaking as the steam slips out the window. I yell as loud as I can, inside. The mental imagine melting as it shrieks. Then a calmness. An acceptance. The xanax has surly kicked in. No matter the ride, I want love.

It's not confirmed. It's inbetween, like me.

Faggot police guy yelling

Name mistaken 3x's

The difference: All my friends and love.

“ I like when things like that happen,” I say, “It’s like the universe is talking back.”

BK

R/R

It's like putting the ocean in a teacup. All I can do is be there. If it breaks, it breaks. If it spills, we get wet.

I'm at the ER again. This one is by pier 5. Even closer to the Statue of Liberty and downtown. It's flush against the harbor. Dead middle in the neighborhood.

I'm already dead. We're just waiting for the body to catch up. She is always a step behind. Lagging, staggering in the past. My legs, scared. Footprints, washed away.

"Who can I even tell? What good would it do? Why would I do that to another?"

I hold the findings in my heart. I can't bear to let them go. To say onto others what was said to me. It's inherently wrong-feeling. To say,

"They've found a bump," as I look into your doe like eyes. I can make them wider. Can you fit me in?

"I lost 13 pounds in a month doing nothing. Together, this doesn't look great."

I want to cry. To be held and comforted. To snuggle up to the one I love.

Bury my face before my body. The sweet earthly scent of pheromones ties me for another moment. In between the pleas.

It comes as it wills. Taking over my whole being. I cry, escape to the darkness, and huff myself back up. It's all hot air, but it'll do in a pinch. As long as I can stay a float but another day.

We speak in terms of seconds. Hours are my new days. For precious few, I am. If life is a mother, then death can be my daddy. Beating me into submission.

Movement is abundantly around. The leaves still rustle, but no longer for me. Perhaps, it is for you? As they scatter atop my grave, do I brush your face? Can you feel me in the wind as I feel you? Did you know such things float above your head? The weight of whole lives wishing to fall from the sky. The weather of us is as unpredictable as it's temporary.

I keep dreaming about the airport. My journey to the terminal. From a foreign land, going to another. I never actually leave the airport. The planes never take off. It's always a rush to wait. Then waiting to wake up.

It would be odd to have gotten cancer again. Specifically on the Fall equinox. I'd appreciate the symbolism. Maybe it's a kidney stone. Whatever the cause, there is a mass. There has been weight loss. Scans are being planned.

"You're a fucking faggot," is screamed. The nurse asks again,

"Sorry, it's Lila?" he asks.

"Yup," I smile and click.

"Fucking faggot. You're all faggots," the screaming continues.

The nurse motions behind the desk.

"You can come," he says with a heavy face.

"What," I ponder, "Oh, you think it's different out there," I point to the window. The nurses look at each other. Confusion then realization was a bright flicker in their eyes.

"Nah, I'm more worried about my cancer."

"Excuse me, your what," he says with wide eyes. The other two nurses look up from the computer. Without the clacking, the only other sound is,

"You're all faggots!."

"Ha," I laugh, "oh, Yeah, goodmorning."

There is a prisoner handcuffed to a chair. He has been shot. There are several officers. One is wearing his exhaustion as a suit. Clearly a detective.

We trade glances. I smile. Feeling cute after a t4t date last night. I'm oddly upbeat.

The detective walks over to the prisoner.

"Alright, listen here and calm down now," I hear him whisper.

"You're a fucking faggot bitch and I'm gonna visit you when I get," The handcuffed man yells, " Why'd you hit me," Everyone pretends not to hear anything. After that, there isn't any yelling.

I'm brought to the very back of the ER. It's much calmer.

"You drank what," I hear on the other side of the curtain.

"Motor oil," a mother says.

"Alright, M'am. You need to take your bra off for this test." a nurse repeats.

The insanity has started again.

The doctor comes in. Her shadow is not far behind.

"Your scan results came back," she looks down at me on the bed.

"Ok," I breath

"There is a soft tissue mass in the previous tumor site." She waits for me to digest.

It doesn't hit at first. My first reaction is there isn't enough data, but then the wheels begin to turn.

It slowly dawns on me. I start to whimper, then sob, and finally full out cry. The doctor places her arm around me.

"There, there," she soothes

"I just got my life back together," I choke out, "I can't do chemo again." I reach for my hair. It's nearly shoulder length now. It curls at the ends. There are even strands of white and blonde parsed throughout.

I've noticed the longer my hair gets, the more I'm spoken to with kindness.

"I'll go grab you some tissue," the doctor slips behind the curtain.

She reappears, as I finish swinging my bookbag around.

"So, it's probably a relapse." I ask eerily calm contrasted to a few seconds ago.

The doctor stops. Looks me up and down, and speaks,

"That's correct."

She hands me the tissues. We say goodbye. I inform her my oncologist already knows.

He'll be calling for the scans. I let him know the three different names this ER used for me. Finally providing the MRN. The only link to my body.

I walk the 5 blocks back home. It's only 9am. The city has just woken up, and barely so at that.

I take Estelle for a walk. She is aggressive. I already know she knows. I give her extra treats that night. So much so she doesn't eat her dinner. Neither do I.

The buzzer rings.

"What, who could that be?" I ask XxXx with a grin.

Two more of my friends clank up the stairs. More family than friend. They trudged here after work, in the rain. All, just to give love—to me.

As they come in, Estelle wags her tail. I smile weakly. We all talk for hours. Sitting in my room. Sprawled out amongst pillows, stuffed animals, and blankets. XXXXX has brought treats. We all laugh and smile. The room is warm. Glowing even.

"Thank you," I choke out, "I've never felt so loved and safe," I smile.

"You never had the chance," XXXXXX chirps back. It hits true and square. A bullseye.

Scan same guy, I see it light up

Such contrast. Such love and queer family. It's the best feeling in the world.