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Finding Papa

I sat, hour ten of my twenty hour shift, staring at that fucking yellow spot. He would come in soon, take my patient's paperwork, pace back and forth, twice, sip on his mineral water, Pellegrino, never Perrier, call his wife and ask about his charming little kids, and then he'd continue. Flirting with every nurse in this damned ward. I remember seeing that yellow spot on his wall the first time I had walked into his office, hands not yet red and heart not yet hardened. And the second, as he fucked me on his desk. The sixth came more abruptly, he told me he was married and had I dared tell his wife I was pregnant he'd ruin me and my not on earth yet baby. She was four now, the other day had asked "*Where's Papa?*" and I had to start inventing a lie for where he was. I hated that spot with its piss yellow tint, and envied it for its ability to remain special. "Nurse!" I had a name before I started work here.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"How is Patient Adams, any progress?"

His name is *Adam*, Doctor. His last name is Ophira. If by *progress* you mean is he feeling better, then no. If by *progress* you mean is he almost off your hands, then yes.

"Fine."

"Very good, Nurse. Thank you." He took the paperwork.

Bastard. David had been asking to run so many tests that Adam's family had surely owed the hospital over one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in medical bills. I walked out, heading to the cafeteria, immune to the hospital smells of latex and Lysol, to grab a small snack for Daff. Daff was all a mother could ask for in a daughter. Her ginger curls covered her head entirely, her dimples were little caves that one imagined exploring as a kid, she was missing her two front

teeth, proud and waiting for the tooth fairy to come, and learning how to whistle by utilizing this freshly formed gap. She was pure. I continued into Adam's room.

"How are you feeling today?" I sat on the edge of his bed, gently tucking his brown bangs aside.

"Some other Nurse came in and gave me vanilla pudding, I was craving the chocolate, but she said the cafeteria was out."

Adam was a handsome man, you could tell, even through the scruff and built up dried saliva on the corners of his mouth. I would clean it off each time I came in to check on him. He was paralyzed from a bike accident during an amateur race when some asshole took the race too seriously and cut him off. He fell off the bike path landing some twenty feet below on his back. An ambulance was called and he was brought in over a month ago. He had this peculiar charisma about him, a boy of twenty, nearly half my age, yet youthful wisdom shone in his misty, hazel eyes. He befriended Daff and his room was filled with her doodles, in whatever space that wasn't already occupied by flowers from friends and his loved ones. He was supposed to be heading back to college in a month, but the bike accident postponed his plans.

"Well lucky for you, I brought you your favorite."

I sat down on his bed, pulling the chocolate off-brand pudding out of my scrubs, leaning towards his bed stand for a spoon as my breast grazed his sculpted arm. He didn't seem to notice.

"Do you want to stick around and watch Jeopardy with me, Nurse, or do you have to do more rounds?"

"I have some time." I started feeding him the pudding as the spoon slowly entered his mouth, in, out for more, in, he swallowed gently.

"Mm, thank you Nurse." He didn't say it like the Doctor had. "Can you lock the door?"

“Sure, Adam.” I slowly walked to the door, the latch made a clicking sound, and I drew the curtain over the small window.

As I returned to his side I felt him hesitate, but then, “I’ve been in here for four weeks. I’m paralyzed for life. I’m... horny, and I have no idea what I’m going to do when I get out of here.” His eyes were glazed over, he stared ahead. I took the remote to mute out Trebek. “Who’s going to want some paralyzed freak? I can’t do shit with my hands, I used to be so *fucking* good with my hands.”

I was trained to respond to these questions professionally, nearly systematically. The patients believed my inauthenticity. The formula was simple: a nice smile, always with the eyes, not just the mouth, simple answer, and a gentle touch to the patient.

But Adam was different. My lips spoke before my words. And his responded.

“Nurse...”

“It’ll be okay, Adam.”

“I know you don’t believe that, I see the pity in your eyes.”

I kissed him, again, this time harder, and felt the blanket rise as my tongue entered his mouth, wet, and his ready. We climaxed, and I heard a soft, *Allie*. It wasn’t since the Doctor and I had made love that I’d heard my name uttered by a man. That was five-hundred and fourteen yellow spots ago. We laid there, enjoying our momentary bliss.

“I’m going to go get you some water, and get myself a cup of coffee.”

“I’ll try to not run away.”

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“Nurse, we’ve got a new patient. Could you go in and check on him? I gotta head home and have dinner with the kids.”

“Of course.”

Adam Ophira. Isn't that a fancy name. I let myself into the room, closing the door behind me, seeing spots of purple and yellow cover the skin of a young man. His right eye was swollen, the rest of him was white plaster. He cracked a smile at the sight of another human being coming to keep him company, so I sat down next to him quietly and took the remote. The first thing that was on was Jeopardy. “What is gravity?” He whispered.

“What is gravity?” Echoed the televised contestant for a mere two hundred dollars.

“At least I didn't suffer trivia knowledge damage.”

I smiled at his pain-filled words.

I lingered in the room until the show had ended, switched off the remote, and started to walk towards the door.

“Nurse?”

“Yes?”

“What should I call you?”

“Nurse is fine.”

“But, what do your friends call you?”

“So we're friends now? I'm not sure if that's in the patient-Nurse contract.”

“Well, I was never much into legal work.”

“You can call me Allie.”

I shut the door behind me, leaving him to rest.

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I quickly put on my scrubs and headed out the door. Adam asked that all mirrors be removed from his room when he got here, and I had never understood. Now, I was thrilled about

this strange inquiry. I didn't want to see the stark contrast between our two bodies, the stretch marks that covered my lower abdomen due to the pregnancy and the long hours that hadn't allowed for me to work off my remaining baby fat. Nor did I want to see the uncombed hair, matted to one side, parted unevenly, a few grey strands hidden under.

I checked in on my other patients as quickly as I could, circled back to the cafeteria for water and coffee, the smell of the place signaling that I should order take-out, before slipping back into Adam's room unnoticed. I had left him there, naked under his blanket, with the mixed bittersweet smells of our sweat. As I walked in I saw his eyes closed, he always looked so peaceful during his naps. I started to dress him and he stirred.

"Mmm," the same sound escaped his lips as before. *He must be dreaming of chocolate.*

I decided it was late enough to call Daff, make sure mother was making her something for dinner. I went into the Nurse's lounge to make a quick call.

"Mama!"

"Hi peach."

"When are you coming home, mama?"

"I'll be home late tonight sweetie, gran is going to tuck you in tonight okay? I left your favorite bed time stories with her, so ask her to read you anything you want tonight."

"Okay mama, I love you."

"I love you, too. Can I talk to gran?"

"Hi Allie."

"Hi mom, thanks again for watching Daff tonight."

"You know, you really gotta start coming home early. This is the sixth time in the last two weeks that you've haven't been here to tuck her in."

“I’m doing the best that I can mom.”

“I’ll see you when you get home, Allison.”

“Bye mom.”

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“You can’t tell her. I’ll pay for an abortion.”

“I’m keeping the baby, David.”

“I’ll make sure you never get another job at a hospital within one hundred miles of here if you dare tell her. I have kids you know.”

“Oh, sure. Maybe you should cover up that yellow spot with a nice picture of you and your kids so the next nurse you decide to fertilize knows what fucked up family her future child will be joining.”

“How dare you speak to me in that tone?”

“So go ahead! Fire me! That’ll keep me from telling your wife.”

“Allie, now, please. Let’s just not speak of this again. Do as you want with the baby, but I won’t be a part of it.”

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I hung up, I craved to see Adam’s smile, and those eyes that brought only comfort.

I approached his bed and the next thing I saw was three other nurses standing over me.

Where am I?

“You lost consciousness in Adam’s room, we heard your scream right before it must have happened.”

“Where’s Adam? Is he okay?”

I rushed into his room to see a blanket covering his entirely still body. *No.*

“His heart stopped, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is common in kids his age, you know that, especially athletes.”

My body was trembling. What had I done. I was wheeled into the Doctor’s office, time number five-hundred and seventeen that I was going to see the yellow spot. He was going to let me have the rest of the day to myself. How fucking nice of him. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Nurse.”

I woke up the next day, my eyes adjusting to the light coming through the window, my pillow, salty, drenched from tears. Daff was playing with her barbies. Innocent and unknowing, the sun gently amplifying the red in her hair. I lay there for a little while longer, watching her tinker and play with her own imagination. Glancing at the alarm clock and noting that it was already 9AM, I closed my thoughts to the pit I felt in my stomach and stood out of bed. I walked through the scattered mess of Daff’s toys, crayons, paper, watercolors, legos. Adam had suggested she get a lego kit and start building things, so I had gone to the toy store that day to buy her a small set. She fell in love.

I scooped her up in one swoop to go have breakfast. Chocolate chip pancakes. I got the chocolate chips out of the cupboard, reaching for the rickety handle on the drawer to get the whisk to beat the cardboard pancake mix and the milk into one gooey mess, holding back my tears. I wouldn’t cry in front of Daff. I wouldn’t. I started moving things aside on the table to make some room. “Mama!” Her chubby hands held up a picture of three, holding hands in a park. “Who’s that sweetie?”

“Papa!”

I clenched every muscle in my face, preventing my tear ducts from spilling over. The eyes were drawn with the green and brown crayons, they created an innocent illusion to Adam.

“That’s very nice sweetie.” I couldn’t tell her the real truth. Daff’s heart could break into many more pieces than mine.

The hospital had its normal buzz, Adam’s room had been cleared of all its flowers and pictures, his family must have come to get his things. Our bittersweet mixture of smells had left with all the other aimless objects, the janitors and other nurses had returned the mirrors into their rightful spots. No trace remained, instead his room was now occupied by another patient.

“Nurse, could you come into my office please?”

The doctor’s voice pierced through the memories of the last month, and I followed him, away from that room. *Five hundred eighteen.*

“Good morning, Doctor.”

“Good morning. I wanted to talk to you about Patient Adams, err, Patient Ophira.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“You know, it never looks good when patients die suddenly in our care, and I believe you were the Nurse on rounds last night, can you tell me what happened? His family is looking for an explanation.”

“He had asked me for some water, so I had gone to the cafeteria to get him some. When I came back, he was dead.”

“You fainted.”

“Yes, Doctor, Adam was so young. I had never seen someone so young die so suddenly.”

“Sure, Nurse. Thank you. Could you call his family today? They’d like to speak with someone that was on call. They’re just looking for empathy, you know, and want to reason through what happened. You’ve done this kind of thing before.”

This kind of thing.

“Okay, Doctor. Is there anything else?”

“That’ll be all Nurse.”

I walked to the Nurse’s lounge. I looked at my hands, had more lines formed in the last twenty four hours or did they always look so cracked and distinct? I sank into one of the chairs, staring at the black phone on the small table next to me. I caught myself tapping my foot on the ground, forced myself to stop, get up, and go to the file cabinet to get Adam’s family’s phone number. I dialed.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Maybe no one is home.

“Hello?”

“Hello, I’m calling from the hospital. My name is Allie. I was a nurse on call last night... When Adam passed.”

“Hi.” I heard a deep exhale and tears being choked back through the static of the phone.

“This is Frankie, I’m Adam’s mother.”

“Hi Mrs. Ophira, I know you wanted to speak to someone who was there last night about Adam’s passing.”

“Yes, do you mind if I come to the hospital?”

“That won’t be a problem. Just ask for Allie at the Nurse’s desk if I’m not there.”

“See you soon, Allie.”

“See you soon.”

Her voice had been trembling on the phone, I could feel her tears.

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“We used to go biking as a family, ever since I was a kid.”

“Really? I’m trying to teach Daff how to ride a bike now, but she’s still using training wheels.”

“I remember teaching my sis how to ride, we’re about six years apart, I just held on to the seat of a two-wheeler as she pedaled, and then when she wasn’t looking I let go.”

“Maybe I’ll try that next time.”

“You have to eventually anyway, let her go, I mean.”

There it was. That simple wisdom.

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I heard a woman asking for Allie. I stepped out of the lounge to greet Frankie. She had his eyes. Although hers were puffy and red from the crying, almost as swollen as his were when he had first come into this sanitized prison, yet hers were caked with cover-up. She seemed fragile, her limbs thin, long legs rooted in two inch heels. Blonde hair pulled into a loose ponytail. We proceeded into a private room that was made for these talks. I offered her some tea.

“Thank you for meeting with me, Allie.”

“I am so sorry for your loss Mrs. Ophira.”

“Frankie, please. Could you tell me how you found him?”

“I was doing my normal rounds last night, Adam was one of the best patients I had ever had. He made everyone on the floor laugh. Anyway, he asked me to get him some water from the cafeteria, so I went and stopped in a few other rooms before coming back. When I got back, I saw his body completely still. Other nurses came in to cover him. His heart had stopped.”

Tears started falling from Frankie’s eyes.

“I don’t know how to tell my daughter.”

“You’ll find the right time.”

“They were so close.”

“If there’s anything I can do…”

“Would you come to his funeral?”

I paused. *Would Adam even want me there?* “Of course.”

“Thank you. Allie. I don’t want to be in your way, I’m sure you’re busy here.”

“It’s no problem.. really.”

“We will see you soon, then.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

I had made a promise that I wasn’t sure I’d be able to keep. After leaving Frankie, without knowing where I was walking I found myself in the Doctor’s office.

“David.”

He turned around, a bit startled. Five hundred and seventeen yellow spots ago was when I had last uttered his name, too.

“Nurse?”

“Daff’s half birthday is in two weeks. She’s turning four and a half. She asked about where *papa* was the other day. I don’t want to lie to *our* daughter any more. Will you come?”

“Nurse, I have no idea what it is that you are talking about. I have a lot of paperwork to handle, please see yourself out.” I stood, in disbelief. How did I let myself sleep with this man. His pearl whites didn’t look so white any more, instead his face was darkened. “Oh, and how was your conversation with Adam’s family? Everything fine?”

“Yes. *David*. Everything is fine.”

I shut the door behind me.

The funeral was to be held two days from now. I had a dress. I could bring Daff. She was too young anyway, she could forget. I stopped by a local Walmart on the way home to get Daff a black dress and shoes to match. She liked new things, I thought back to the legos.

I packed a chocolate pudding in my purse, I’d put it next to his grave, I assume they have chocolate in heaven, but who really knew. I’d hate for him to be stuck with vanilla.

“Mama, where we goin’?”

“We are going to see papa, honey.”

I stuck the funeral flag that Frankie had left for me at the hospital onto the antenna of my car, strapped in Daff tight. Half an hour later we were driving down a gravel driveway, a long, endless stream of cars was already parked for the funeral; he was loved.

Hand in hand, Daff and I walked to see the open casket.

“Adam!” She started to reach in to poke his face, something she loved doing from the day that she met him, digging her pudgy fingers into the dimples of his smile. I quietly reached for her hand, tucking it within mine, leading her away. “Mama?”

“Ssh, sweetie. You can’t do that here.” Even now, I couldn’t tell her the truth about Adam. She was too young to comprehend a funeral.

Suddenly, at a distance I noticed Frankie. I ignored my knees quivering, squeezed Daff's hand, "Ow, mama!"

"Sorry, sweetie." Too tightly. And walked to say hi. I was keeping my promise.

"Hi Frankie."

"Hello, Allie. I'm so glad you could make it." Her cheeks were hollow, her pain and mine met as she reached for my arm, and tears filled her eyes as she asked about Daff. "Please, Allie, let me introduce you to my husband."

His father had his jaw line and the same pointed nose on which he wore horn-rimmed glasses. An intellect, no wonder Adam always knew the answers to Jeopardy. I imagined for a moment all four of them, his sister, mom, dad, and Adam all sitting around the television, competing against one another to see who knew the most. Love filled their home. It poured out of the windows into the driveway and enveloped the entire neighborhood. It was there when he pedaled up the mountain, but love couldn't be there when he needed it most, when the asshole cut him off. It couldn't be there to keep his heart pumping. He was loved. But it wasn't enough to save him. What would be of this family now that Adam was no longer here, had I brought them here? No, Adam's heart stopped. I looked down at Daff, she was smiling up at me, "Where's papa?"

"Papa is dead, sweetie. Papa is dead."