Sara sat with her head draped in front a monitor displaying medical records, and a desk full of study materials. A chair next to her squeaked under shifting pressure as Joyce rose from her seat. The heavyset woman snatched up her thermos, turned to Sara, and said, “Alright honey, I’m heading to the bathroom.” Sara acknowledged her leave with a nod, and picked up her phone from the counter. The only notification to greet her was a clock displaying 4 :13 AM in grim, grey letters. Not that she didn’t expect that. At this hour the hospital was a ghost ship, and the only activity Sara saw outside of the nursing station was the occasional emergency, or the other shifting, zombie-like attendants. There are no windows in this place, no breeze, and no colors. The building, in all its capacity, was a capsule of death. Everything from the dirty food, to the sterile color scheme reeked of faltering mortality. Death hung in the air, and its weight pressed on her shoulders, squeezing the breath from every dull moment in her life. This is your last night-shift Sara, this is your last shift, she thought.

As her mind drifted in and out of despondency, a cold draft tickled her spine, and woke her into a state of alertness. Sara popped out of her seat, and rounded the corner, only to see that Joyce had left the door ajar, and the emergency room exposed to the public. It wasn’t her fault, Sara supposed. The door regularly got stuck, and the poor, round woman couldn’t reach its rusty hinges. As to why the next set of doors was open, Sara did not have an answer. The automatic doors to the parking lot sat wide apart, letting the chilly autumn air into the building. Sara found herself, once again, thinking that St. Mary’s needed to get their shit together. As if working in the emergency department wasn’t scary enough, now she had to worry about strangers wandering into the building. Seeing how the security guards were not at their post, Sara did what she could, and unlatched the defective security door, closing it behind her as she retreated into the ER. This is your last shift, she thought, this is your last shift.

4:37 AM. Where was Joyce? She had been known to take long bathroom breaks, but the growing time frame of her absence worried Sara to the point of texting her. The only answer to her inquiry was the vibration of Joyce’s phone sitting on the opposite side of the counter. Even more worrying was the fact that Sara had not welcomed a new patient in the better part of an hour. This was unheard of on the graveyard shift. She wished, for the first time at this piss-poor job, that she had an emergency to distract her from these uneasy feelings, but the activity on her floor was as still as the stale air that hung in it. Sara even found herself missing the usual, laborious noises of her bloated coworker.

Stillness. The only sound to console her was the dreary beeping from various medical machines. Things were adding up. The doors were open, Joyce was gone, and so was the security at the ER entrance. Trying her best to console the uneasy thoughts, Sara felt a new determination to avoid any catastrophes on her very last midnight shift. She picked up her phone, and decidedly dialed the number to the front desk. She waited impatiently as the dial tone took ages to chime in her ear until finally, she heard it ring. The sound of a click on the other line shook Sara from her plight, and her face lit up as a voice on the other side said, “Front desk, Michael here.”

WHACK! The thunderous noise of steel clashing with concrete tore her attention from the phone. Sara whipped around to see Joyce, wrought with angst, staring down at her thermos which was now streaming hot, crummy hospital-soup all over the ER floor. “Oh, God-damn-it!” Joyce quipped to herself as she gathered her container from the ground. The front desk attendant sounded in Sara’s receiver a second time, “Hello?” Sara fumbled with the phone as she regained her composure, and responded, “Hi Michael, can you tell me where the security for the ER entrance is?” The grumbly voice took a labored breath and responded, “They had to remove an unwanted from the parking lot, so they should be back at their post soon.” The simple response didn’t exactly ease her nerves, but it would suffice. “Thanks,” she said, and hung up the phone. With a glimmer of hope, Sara watched her coworker drudge through what would be a slow cleaning process, and thought that perhaps that something terrible would not be happening on her very last shift in this miserable department.

She was wrong. The doors to the emergency department burst open in a frenzy of confusion, and attendants wheeling a stretcher came crashing into the hallway, trotting through Joyce’s soupy mess. Sara sprang from her seat and joined her cohorts as they docked their patient at the nearest available station. A shocked paramedic stared agape at Sara, momentarily speechless. “We called ahead, and no one answered,” the man said, “It’s an overdose. Unknown substance. His breathing slowed, so we gave him 1 mg of Narcan, but it seems to be regressing again.” Nodding, Sara went to find a crash kit, and saw that Joyce had already retrieved one. As Joyce prepared the kit on the side of the bed, Sara retained a closer look at the lifeless body on the cart. A young male around the age of 23 sat limp on the stretcher with bloody, puke-stained rags stretched across his frail frame. Every now and then, he would take a ragged breath and streams of stale blood and snot would drip from his mouth and nose. As a team of doctors assembled, Sara busied herself hooking the patient up to a bag-valve mask. “How’s the breathing?” a doctor asked, fumbling with his gloves. “Slowing, and not responding to the naloxone.” The EMS said. “Alright, Joyce,” the doctor instructed, “let’s get the defibrillator ready.” Joyce readied the machine, and Sara grasped the kid’s messy chin with one shaky hand, then pumped air into his lungs with the other. Her efforts became more labored as the young man’s central nervous system gave out, and his lungs relaxed. Sara grasped the cold body even tighter, and squeezed the valve mask with increasing strain, trying not to make eye contact with the boy’s dead, dilated pupils. Minutes went on like hours and Sara did her best to ignore the bodily fluids soaking her glove, or the horrid smell wafting off the patient; instead focusing on the slow rise and fall of his ribcage. Joyce began cutting away at the kid’s soiled shirt to reveal a torso covered in warts and gangrene; just as ugly as the gunk flowing from his mouth. With each ascent and descent of his necrotic chest, Sara noticed extra movement stemming from his abdomen as it fluttered with tremors underneath every forced breath. Pads from the defibrillator were applied to his ruined body, and before Sara could ascertain what was happening, the boy’s vitals began to flatten, and she was being told to step away from a newly deceased carcass.

“CLEAR!” A doctor screamed, and the kid shook under convulsive shock. A small blip of life appeared on the monitors, and then faded into stagnancy. Undeterred, the medical staff readied for another resuscitation. Sara pumped more air into the patient’s scabby, blue lips, then stepped back in preparation of another electric charge. The doctor pressed his finger to the button, and nodded to himself with a weird sense of determination. “CLEAR!” He shouted, and sent 300 joules of energy into the patient’s heart. The kid’s muscles contracted, and his eyes shot open in glaring pain. Beside him, life signs sputtered back onto the monitor.

Waves of agony trembled across his skin, and he writhed across the stretcher, scaring back the attendants. Frozen in place, Sara watched from the corner as the kid clawed at the straps of his valve mask, heaving underneath its foggy plastic. The straps broke free, and he let out a wincing cry, then doubled over; puking up the bloody contents of his stomach. Puke filled with rotting hemoglobin splattered off the floor and onto Sara’s Scooby Doo scrubs and padded sneakers. She retreated further, but backed herself into the curtain divider, finding herself unable to escape the awful scene.

After two unsuccessful dry heaves, the kid found relief in his third attempt, and spouted an even larger amount of blood and muck from his body. He growled in deluded pain, then collapsed back into the stretcher, falling into his previous, lifeless state. The life signs began to diminish once again, yet the staff stood in shock, failing to resume their work, instead, gawking at the mess on the floor. Sara was not scared because the patient was about to die a second time. She had seen that before. She was not scarred of the overdose either, for there had been plenty in her time at the hospital. What scarred her was that in the pool of blood beneath her feet there swam what appeared to be a dozen tadpoles; crawling and sliding through the murky goo with their underdeveloped legs.

Hands grabbed Sara from behind and pulled her away from dying patient and the pool of parasitic, plodding amphibians. A voice asked if she was okay, but as she stared down at her crimson-stained garments, only one thought crossed her mind: This is your last shift Sara. This is your last shift.

* G.D. Goya