

two sixty-two

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Damp linen, sweaty forehead
A tangle of wires
emerges from the pocket
of her worn, blue hospital johnny
A haphazard braid in her hair,
the best I could do.

The nurse at one side of the bed
and I at the other
holding her hand, squeezing it
once, *tight*, again, *tighter*,
looking for some sign of consciousness
behind the anesthesia clouding her eyes.

“Can you feel that?” I plead.
My relentless hand squeezing,
the tug of the hairbrush on her snarled locks,
the cold washcloth on her forehead,
something. Anything.

Her hand slack as I hold it in mine
I squeeze it again -
“You listen to me, you’re gonna make it!”
I urged her, longing for a sign
that she was not all but gone.

Suddenly, I feel a brush
against my gloved fingers, fleetingly.
Could it be? I hesitate in my belief
and squeeze her again.
Are you in there?

And then I see it –
A straining to lift her eyelids
as her tired eyes search for mine
and the corners of her lips
tug at the ET tube.
In that ephemeral moment
her hand squeezed mine
It was gentle but it was real.

Happy tears, relief, indescribable joy
pervades the room.

On the brink of her drug-induced slumber
she stirs delicately, small movements
that disturb the stiff hospital sheets.
I reach out to soothe her,
my hand caressing her arm
then her brow, tucking away
the stray hairs matted
to her feverish forehead.

I willed her to hear my words
for them to wake something up inside of her
as they left my smiling lips and
forced themselves past my mask.
A muffled exclamation
that reverberated recklessly
around the vacuum-sealed room:
“We’re gonna kick this thing in the ass,
but you gotta fight with us.”

At 1908 I punch out at the cafeteria
breathe the fresh air, cold and wet
on my face and my dry hands
as I cross the hospital parking lot,
near empty, to my car.
Driving home on I-91, feel-good music
on my stereo, I feel the stirrings of hope
not laden with the burden
of fear, tragedy, uncertainty
that had lurked with me for days.

Scrubs peeled off in the garage
a scalding hot shower
a late, reheated dinner
and a short night of sleep
before I do it all over again
the next day.

When I walk into the unit,
she is raising hell before the sun is up
Full of piss and vinegar, she is
a bull in a china shop
wrestling with all the wires and tubes
thrashing in the starchy white sheets
disoriented, confused, aggravated
but alive and awake and breathing.
We rejoice. We celebrate. We cry.

But she isn’t there to stay.

Just when we thought
we had won, it turns out
we had already lost.

Sedate and limp she lay,
the boisterous energy gone
no sooner than it had arrived
I squeeze her hand gently.
I do not will her to wake,
to squeeze me back.

A basin filled with warm water
for a bath, her last.
Freed her hair from her imperfect braid
washed, parted, and combed.
A final changing of the sheets.
Positioned her comfortably in the bed –
No more flipping, no more rolling
or tortuous turning.
No more fight, no more hurt.

Covered in a fresh johnny
and a soft bath blanket folded back,
a crease over her belly
as it rises and falls, slowly, spasmodically.
Tubes and lines withdrawn,
the pumps, disconnected, fall silent.
On the monitor above her bed
the little peaks and valleys
that were the beatings of her heart
grow further and further apart still.

I hold her hand in mine, my goodbye,
a final squeeze, a soft touch
as I place it atop her covers
for her family to hold.
Two chairs at the bedside, a box
of abrasive one-ply Kleenex
on the nightstand, a tray arranged
with stale coffee and cookies on a cart
The room prepared for the goodbyes
of her loved ones
and an invitation to
her final visitor.