

HOSPITAL CORNERS

*I*t was not the way anyone would want to spend the end of the summer before his senior year in college, but there I was: in an almost tropically warm hospital room, my bandage-wrapped knee groaning after having been opened and having its ligaments monkeyed with and summarily stapled shut while I was dead to the world, me pressing a button rapid-fire to self-administer a few more reluctantly yielded trickles of morphine, my two fellow invalids grunting and wheezing from their respective sufferings of intense sciatica and another mystery ailment, when the orderlies trundled in the resident who would occupy the fourth corner of our room, Jorge Quevedo, who looked worse than the three of us combined.

I did not know his name at the time, nor what ailed the man, but even from my groggy opiate haze, I could see he was in bad shape. It looked as though both his legs were in casts, there was a bulky plastic contraption around his midsection that gave his torso the cylindrical aspect of an oil drum, and a patch of gauze obscured half his face. Several IVs dangled from poles on either side of him, more bags of glucose and blood and morphine and other unidentifiable liquids than seemed safe for one man to have flowing into his body from foreign plastic bladders. I felt lucky to have only one appendage in wraps and a single, water torture drip of sedative. Looking at him made me sore.

Unlike my other two roommates, who made occasional audible acknowledgments of their condition, Jorge Quevedo did not make any noises and lay utterly still in the post-surgery repose that resembled nothing so much as an anesthetic death. Because of the hulking gear across his middle and the angle at which we were lying in sight of each other—on our backs, toe-to-toe across the room—I couldn't see his stomach reassuringly rising and falling. The orderlies left him with the three of us as they might have a man in the morgue, and the room went quiet again.

Quevedo and I had the two beds against the wall farthest from the room's door. The windows were set high up on the wall so that all I could see was blue sky and know that the incessant California sun was

performing as expected for August, and that it was sometime in the afternoon, several hours after my surgery. Diagonally across from me, closer to the door, was a thin, elderly man with greasy gray hair and a small mustache who I knew was German and suffering from sciatica because for the few hours that I'd been awake, he'd said the same thing to any nurse, orderly or doctor who walked into the room, whether to see him or not—"Ach, my sciatica is awful"—in a thick, garbled English that to my untrained ear sounded certainly to be from Berlin or The Black Forest. German, anyway.

To my left, behind a sheet that hung as a shroud of privacy, lay an unknown man. He would sometimes offer faint guttural rumblings from the other side of the cotton divide, but he never spoke, and instead looked up (or at least I pictured him doing so) at the TV we shared, the picture box hanging precariously over the space between the beds of Quevedo and the German sciatic, its screen forever on and the sound (thankfully) off, as the channel had not changed and therefore afforded us continual access to soap operas and talk shows that silently nibbled away at our day in fluctuating shades of violet that indicated a blown cathode tube. I didn't have the energy or gumption to shut it off and tempt his wrath, and perhaps neither did he mine.

I had just had my "elective" surgery that morning, a knee reconstruction to repair a torn anterior cruciate ligament and a teeny piece of the medial meniscus that had gone to oblivion with it after a gangly stranger with clown's feet had fallen on top of me in a pickup basketball game the month before. I liked the use of the term "elective," as if the orthopod was just a fascinating professor whose one-day seminar I could choose to take or not. With my kneecap swollen to the size of a subcutaneous mango and my prospects for walking without pain slim to none, the procedure had not felt like a choice. However, my condition was not a chronic one such as that of my German roommate, nor as grave as Mr. Quevedo's appeared, and certainly did not send me into a mad state that required I watch silent TV round the clock ala my next-bed neighbor, so I presumed that relative to my short-term cohorts, "elective" probably was a term carrying the proper amount of weight.

After a few days at Diablo Valley General, the plan was for me to recover at my parents' house through the end of August and then to head back east for my last year at Georgetown, while in synchronized precision, the house would go into escrow and my parents would head north to their new digs in Seattle, where my father had secured a position as chair of the history department at a local university. It

appeared that I would spend my last days as a resident of Diablo Valley bed-ridden and on crutches.

I lolled in and out of mid-afternoon sleep, my leg snapped into a device that mechanically bent my knee to keep it from getting stiff, the anesthesia still a rain cloud lingering over me, when I came awake suddenly to a rush of visitors at Quevedo's bed. There were men, women, and children of varying ages, perhaps a dozen of them in all, gathered around Quevedo, all of them speaking Spanish in quiet tones, though the agglomeration of their voices made for a loud burble that seemed rather like a crowd's murmuring before a play or a concert. Though noisier than was probably advisable for a room filled with invalids, the sound of their voices relaxed me.

I heard Quevedo go, "Uhhhhh," and not say much else as his visiting family asked him *preguntas* about how he was doing and carried on *conversaciones* with each other, the women tending to look on in more visibly concerned fashion than the men. I noticed a small crucifix had been hung on a hook in the wall, and that the only one who was saying nothing was a young girl, perhaps six or seven years old at the most, who was looking over the bars at the side of the bed and down at the man I presumed (correctly, as it turned out) to be her father. She looked on with curiosity, rather than with a little girl's fearful viewing of an unknown malady affecting her parent, but the way her small hands gripped the bar had my eyes misting. I pressed again for morphine.

"Ach, mein sciatica is killing me," the German sciatic said as my parents walked by him.

My mother gave the German patient a distant, sympathetic smile and then I saw her take in the expansive Mexican family with something like a scolding mother's "shush" gaze before she finally settled on me and my druggy mug. My hair felt as though someone had pulled a comb backwards through it, so that it all stuck straight up in back with no hope of returning to its natural lie-down state, and my mother seemed to recognize this with concern as she ran her hand over my head before she smooched it.

"Well, Foster," she said to me. "How is the patient?"

"Yes," my father the historian said as he came up on the opposite side of my bed. "How goes the Battle at Wounded Knee?"

What a duo my parents made, he the joker to her straight man. He was red-faced, red-haired and big-nosed in a Boston Irish way, and the gray hair at his sideburns gave him just the right distinguished look that a soon-to-be chair of a university history department probably needed. His propensity for enthusiasm and his impish streak were as wide as

Counties Galway and Kildare (home of his ancestors), but could squeeze down to an earnest sentimentality at the first rain. He was disorganized and forgetful of small details, such as the names of my friends and the location of the cereal in the house, though his memory for military history, and for stamps and coins—pick a country, any country—was elephantine.

My mother, by contrast, was organized to a fault. A librarian by training and trade, she had Dewey Decimated our lives right down the line, everything in the house labeled and cross-referenced twice. Before any major purchases, my mother would conduct thorough research, preparing a paper with an annotated bibliography of sources to carefully lay out the best course of action. I would wake up as a boy to notes and “action plans” stuck to my bedroom door, trails of informational Post-its littering the walls and closets of the house. When I hit puberty, she had left a manila folder on my bed filled with articles about birth control and STDs. At the start of high school, she had given me a personally typed list of the 100 works (with plenty of Irish writers to honor my father’s heritage as well as New England Yankees to honor her own) that I would need to read by age 18 if I was to become a reasonably well-read citizen of Western Civilization. These things she would present with wide hazel eyes that were sometimes unnerving, appearing shocked by what the world had to offer as they often did, though this impression of her was misleading, because she was an accepting, soft-spoken woman of generally good, if driven, humor. The eyes looked down at me now, considerably shocked, waiting for a reply.

“The patient,” I said, “is sore, gaga on morphine, and unable to pee.”

“Why don’t you pee then?” my mother said, as though all I needed was a game set of parents to get things churning and she expected me to try right then and there now that the required progenitors had arrived. She offered me the plastic container at the side of the bed that looked suspiciously like the jug in which I’d been served water.

“I can’t. I’ve tried. I feel like I have to, but I can’t make it go. I can’t go to the bathroom, front door or back door,” I said, using the old delicate family terms for the two means of relieving oneself.

“Yes,” my father said. “Morphine does have that unfortunate ancillary effect.”

“Now they tell me,” I said, and pictured a week without going to the bathroom at all, and then tried to unpicture it. I’d dribbled enough morphine into my system to constipate a battleship.

"We'll ask the doctor about it," Mom said. "See if there's anything we can do. I wonder if they have a patient medical reference anywhere in the hospital?"

"Easy, Mom," I said.

My father looked over at the burbling Mexican family, then back at me. "It's loud as the Chaco War in here."

"More like the campaign of Pancho Villa," I said, groggily. "It's not so bad."

"Say," Dad said, brightening. "Do you realize that you are in the Magna Carta room? Room 1215."

"Gee, I don't know how I could have missed that when they wheeled me in here non compus mentis."

"Oh, and hey," he said, brandishing a letter. "You have mail. A note from your itinerant friend Wayne."

"Wynne."

"Yes, yes, right. Look at this cancellation. It's very interesting. I haven't seen many cancellations from this part of Peru. You should hold on to that. It could be very valuable some day." He gestured with his pinkie at the relevant Peruvian ink markings on the envelope.

"OK."

"Colin, stop it, you're tiring him," my mother said, and then reached in a book bag over her shoulder and pulled out one of her manila folders. "When you're up to it, Foster, here's some reading to keep you busy. There are articles in here about knee joints, proper physical therapy, exercise, early-onset arthritis and what you can do to avoid it, and a piece with sound advice for young investors." She brandished the folder high in the air as if this were some "mmm mmm" reading, and then set it on the stand next to my bed.

"Thanks."

"Dr. Leary said things went well," she said, and I vaguely remembered a dream-like conversation with a man who had two Frankenstein prongs growing out the sides of his neck. "Oh, and Pia said she'll be along shortly," she added.

Ah, Pia Lopez. Morphine for the soul. We'd met at a party at the very end of the spring semester in Georgetown, discovered that we were each from the Bay Area (she from San Francisco) and had a ridiculously magical first date, walking, talking and kissing along the monuments of the Capitol Mall. We were both heading home for the summer within a few days of each other, and the Bay Bridge romance grew quickly thereafter. Our third date had been for dinner at her parents' place in the Richmond District, and though this was much

earlier than I usually cared to meet any girlfriend's parents, it felt as though it was completely natural and appropriate, and we gorged on Mrs. Lopez's chimichangas, fresh refried beans and sweet chili rellenos oozing queso. But now Pia was leaving early to head back to Georgetown and start an internship at a women's health clinic before school began, though she had changed her original flight to a red-eye leaving that night so she could see me after my surgery, if only briefly. My heart swelled now with gratitude for this gesture, and I sighed contentedly.

"Foster, are you all right?" Mom asked.

She'd interrupted Dad talking about a book on the Boer War that he'd just read for the third time, to the point where he now actually had the seventy-nine pages of footnotes committed to memory.

"I'm fine," I said. "Just sleepy."

Then Mom convinced Dad they should go, based on AMA surveys she'd seen on the best environments for successful post-surgical recovery. She looked again at the large family environment across the aisle and said, "They really should let that man get some rest on his own."

"Maybe he likes it," I said. Then they kissed me with promises to check with the nurses on my morphine-clogged condition, and left.

Pia arrived a while later as the German patient groaned, "Mein sciatica," in a harsh, strained voice capable of scratching ear drums. She didn't hear him for the minor din the Quevedo family, smaller now but still a substantial force, was making. She came up by the bedside and gave me a gentle kiss. I puckered for a more earnest kiss, but found my tongue waddling around my lips as though novacained, and I gave up. Though we had seen each other naked plenty of times by then and were beginning to get to know each other's bodies rather well, having her there with me while I was wearing a ratty hospital gown, my hair askew, smelling a bit ripe no doubt, and vulnerably snapped into a knee-bending machine, seemed to represent a new level of intimacy for us.

Pia's hair was short and dark, framing a pretty, round face which burst into a smile easily. She had a beautiful set of exquisite, crooked teeth that I loved for their relentless asymmetry, two slightly off-kilter but interesting halves coming together into a tantalizing whole that shined out "pleased to be with you" every time she opened her mouth. Her face was shiny and brown in the half-light of early evening coming through the window, and she was wearing an outfit she knew I loved, a

pair of Indonesian hoop earrings that reminded me of the first time we'd met, and a black silk blouse that shifted lazily across her breasts and between my fingers. I felt a rising under my covers, and I wished I could clear the room. My incessant knee throb was indeed banished for a moment.

"Hi, sweetie," she said, then took my hand, brought it to her cheek, and closed her eyes. She was always making wonderful gestures like that. She asked how I was in her husky voice.

"I'm OK. I'm sore, but that's to be expected. The main problem is I can't go to the bathroom."

"Oh no," Pia said, and her glorious, petite brow wrinkled. "Do you need help?"

"There's nothing you can do. I took too much morphine and it clogged me up." I lifted the offending gray button with which I had incapacitated myself. "I can feel my bladder pushing to get out, but I can't get myself to go."

"Can't they do something?"

"I don't want to suggest alternatives to the natural," I said. I'd seen the nurses take a bag, filled to bursting with rusty fluid, away from Jorge Quevedo's bedside after my parents left. I knew how catheters worked. No thanks.

We talked for a while about the surgery, about her upcoming internship, about what it would be like to be in school together as a couple, how it would be hard to be apart for four whole weeks, the first extended separation our relationship would have to weather. I wasn't looking forward to a month without Pia while I was laid up on my parents' couch, patting my old retriever's head while my mother plied me with articles on the benefits and dangers of sitting still and packed my boyhood into mover's boxes. I slipped my hand on top the bar and around Pia's waist, felt the press of her soft hip against my fingers.

"My lease is coming up at the end of October," Pia said.

"Really," I answered without thinking. "Are you going to renew?" I knew she hated her apartment and had experienced something of a falling out with one roommate.

Pia paused. She looked out the window before staring straight at me, earnest and soft eyed. "Well, I thought we might want to talk about moving in together, maybe."

I hesitated, and I suppose I must have looked like a young male squirming amongst his unsowed oats.

"I already told Wynne I'd live with him. We've signed the lease and everything. It runs through next May," I said. "Plus, he's out of the country," I added. No way to get a hold of the man, after all.

Pia's lovely teeth were nowhere in evidence. "Do you not want to? If you don't want to that's fine," she said.

"No no," I protested, my head starting to feel light, making me speak haltingly. "I just . . . promised Wynne . . . that's all . . ."

"He could get another roommate."

"But . . . I . . . sort of . . . want to live with Wynne." With a year left on my college meter, I liked the idea of keeping my own place, a bastion of foolish male buffoonery, for a little while longer.

"Fine. Forget it," Pia said. She moved out of my grip and towards the end of the bed.

"Pia," I said, quietly pleading, feeling exhausted. "Te amo." This was usually my way of telling her I loved her without having to be embarrassed by saying it in English, which most people who were generally within earshot of us counted as their primary language. In this instance, however, the language and the tone I'd chosen attracted the interested glances of several of the Mexican ladies near the Quevedo bed.

Pia ignored me and began speaking to the women who had peeked into our domestic spat. They exchanged information in Spanish. I heard Pia introduce herself and get the various names of the people around the bed. I heard Jorge Quevedo's name for the first time, then the words coche and accidente in reference to Jorge, and then a few words that indicated they were discussing my condition, as Pia took hold of the foot on my good leg and began rubbing my sole through the blanket, even as she kept her back to me. Eventually, they stopped talking and Pia came back close to me.

"Poor guy," she said. "Some idiot hit him head on, smushed the dashboard down onto both his legs. He hit his head on the wheel, broke both femurs and cracked four vertebrae."

I winced. "I could tell it was pretty bad."

"They're worried about him. He's not really talking," Pia said.

"Oh boy," I said, lamely. "That little girl just breaks my heart."

"What girl?"

I looked and saw that the little girl wasn't there anymore.

"She was here before. His daughter I think. So cute and innocent. She looks like she could be a little you."

"Trying to win my good graces again with flattery?" she said, only a little perturbed.

"You know I love you, Pia."

"I know that, you poohead," she allowed, and then planted a kiss on said cabeza.

"We can talk more about this later when I'm out of the hospital. I'm still groggy," I said, still intending to go with my original living plan for my senior year but also not wanting to send her packing while angry.

She took my sandpaper chin in her downy hand, "You can bet on that, Foster," and kissed me fat on the mouth.

Perhaps some hospital patients would say that they hate the daytime for all of its visual reminders of where one is, being able to see the cold trappings of modern medicine and how sick everyone really looks, but for my dinero, nighttime in hospitals is much worse. Pia and my parents and the other visitors were gone, which made things quieter in my little corner of the world, but also significantly reduced my chances of encountering a healthy person. The room was filled with strange mood lighting from red nurse call flashers, small fluorescent tubes over each bed, mysterious white bulbs that indicated something electric was on somewhere, and of course the TV, showing James Garner as Rockford huddled behind a tank-sized convertible in an absurdly wide 1970's collar while bullets ricocheted soundlessly off the car's hood. Jorge Quevedo was quiet, as was the mystery neighbor, but the sciatica patient was on a constant moan cycle, his pain becoming my pain by association. Sometimes he would repeat the "sciatica" he'd been saying all day, sometimes phrases in German, but most often the general phlegmy groaning that had become his trademark. With my own anesthetic largely worn off now, the sun gone and unable to lull me into a warmly induced cat nap, my knee throbbing double time from my denying it painkillers, the beginnings of bed sores blossoming on my back, my bladder feeling as though it was trying to push out from beneath my belly button, electric monitors buzzing, and Herr Patient "Ach'ing," I was wide awake with time to think and obsess about my pain.

"Foster?" I heard a female voice say, apparently from out of the television.

"Have you gone to the bathroom?" the voice asked.

I looked to my left and saw that a nurse stood next to me. She looked blurry.

"Hmmmm?"

"Have you been to the bathroom today? At all?" she said and jiggled my empty plastic piss pot.

"No. I think the morphine stopped me up."

"OK," she said tenderly. "Why don't I get one of our male orderlies to come in here and stand you up next to the bed? It might be that you just need to get off your back to get things flowing in the right direction."

I agreed, my bladder now distended and feeling what I imagined a third-trimester womb might feel like. The room was near silent for once, with the sounds of even breathing, though I thought I heard the mystery patient grumble.

A few minutes later, a great shadow entered through the door and came to the side of my bed. A young man stood there and said, "So we're going to try and go to the bathroom, huh?"

He was a Goliath. His biceps were as thick as my thigh, and he was tall enough to require care passing through low freeway tunnels. He had a flattop haircut and a little boy's whisker-less ruddy skinned face, which despite his size, made him look like a benign drill sergeant. I wasn't crazy about the idea of a young guy helping me pee, but I didn't have a good idea of who'd I'd have preferred.

"Wow," I said. "Do you play football?"

"Yep, defensive end for St. Mary's. Four-year starter. My name's Bill." He was indeed no more than a year older than me, but the fact that he had a good eight inches and hundred pounds on me made me feel like a child next to him. "Let's get you standing."

Bill eased me out of the knee contraption holding me in place and then off the bed to a standing position, where I swayed for a few moments getting my bearings and tolerating the pricking rush of blood to my heavy leg. My clammy back and bare butt poked out from the open flaps of my gown.

"OK then," Bill said. "Here you go."

He handed me the plastic jug and then looked up at the TV's flashings of purple and indigo to give me some measure of privacy. He held tight to my arm, standing at one side and utterly confident of his ability to lift me with one hand and put me safely back in bed should I begin to slip. Pressing my weight all onto my good foot, I held the jug under my gown with one hand, my shrunken pecker with the other, and wondered if this was what a hopelessly backed-up lord in the Middle Ages would have felt like when one of his strong vassals had to help him get out of bed to relieve himself into his pisspot. I stood there and nothing happened. I closed my eyes, bent my head, pushed on all the

muscles of my nether region that had atrophied and forgotten how to urinate, willed my urethra to open wide as the Mississippi, thought of flooding and waterfalls and geysers. But I was dry as the Mojave or else had the worst case of stage fright ever.

"Sorry Bill, guess we've got a no go here," I finally said.

"It happens," he said, shrugging, then snapped me back into place on my Posturepedic and went on his friendly, hulking way.

Dr. Leary came in bright and early the next morning to check up on me on his way to opening up another patient's knee. He had this way of bringing in his hand high for a shake, like he wanted you to make a game of snagging hold of it out of the air rather than fuddling with the boring old, tried-and-true low shake. Having grabbed him with some difficulty, I was shaking his hand with my right arm draped over the top of my skull like a Mr. Joe Casual who'd gone into an unnatural convulsion when he asked me about my problem.

"No urination or evacuation of the bowels thus far?"

"No."

"Hmmm," he said.

A new nurse came in sometime later as if she was the bad cop to Dr. Leary's good one.

"You've got to go to the bathroom by noon or so, or else I'm going to have to hook you up to a catheter and give you a suppository," she said, ominously, then left without smiling as if I was making her life supremely difficult. I felt the bags under my eyes draw lower. What had happened to my tender, understanding night nurse, I wondered, who came up with humane (if unsuccessful) solutions? Giving a deadline didn't seem to heighten my chances of performing.

I was thinking this as the Quevedos returned in force right after breakfast. They were hushed at first, trying to elicit more than the few words they'd gotten out of Jorge the day before. Even though they were at a lower decibel than at any time of the previous day, the German patient immediately began saying, "Qviet, Qviet," every few minutes or so, and holding his head in his hands in frustration. I might have felt sorry for him, but I'd gotten little resting done because of him, and his voice had begun to grate on me to the point where my sympathy was short-lived and anything he said sounded to me like an unjustified harangue.

I watched the Quevedos lovingly hover over their fallen Jorge. The women kissed him on the arms and forehead, any place they could find

a bare, unharmed patch of skin, while the men looked for things to touch and not having the legs (their first choice, I could see, by their hurried pulling back of hands from the leg casts some had forgotten were there), settled for leaning on the bars at the sides of the bed or sometimes cupped hands at the backs of their own necks. The little girl had returned, too, and it occurred to me that she might be spending a lot of the rest of her summer vacation in a hospital.

She saw me looking at her and peered back without shyness. As she was crowded away from Jorge's bed, she spun around on the floor at the exact center of the room between the four beds, her short dress wheeling like a delicate tropical drink umbrella, her legs bare, thin and nicked here and there with the scrapes of a little girl's playtime. She pulled the cotton sheet to the left of my bed to one side and took a quick look at my TV-watching neighbor, then came alongside me. Her eyes were brown and soulful.

"Como te llamas?" I asked her.

"Lucia. My name is Lucia," she said.

"Oh, you speak English," I said, feeling foolish. "Is that your daddy over there?"

"Uh huh." She tilted her head at a right angle while throwing her hip out in the other direction, a patented little girl move. She looked at the brace that had my knee in its tight grasp.

"What's that?" she asked.

"That's a machine for bending my knee, so it can move, but not too much, because I hurt it," I said, then pressed a button so she could see the motor slowly bend my knee at the slightest of angles and then push it back down to not quite straight. I grinned as best I could through a grimace.

"Lucia!" a woman said, and whisked over from Jorge's bed. "No molesta el hombre!"

"No hay problema," I said quickly, not wanting this girl to get herself in trouble. She had enough worries. The woman was still frowning at Lucia, but seemed to realize she had overreacted, and that Lucia was behaving just fine. "Como está su esposo?" I asked her, since it was obvious from her bedside manner that she was his wife, or at least girlfriend.

"Ay," she said, sighing and looking back at Jorge, before looking at me again. "Yo tengo tanto . . ." and then I missed most of what came rapidly rushing next, except for an hombre and cabeza, but the gist of her fears and worries was clear. She seemed almost ready to cry when

she finished with another "Ay" and then ran her hand to her forehead and gazed at the ceiling.

"Esta hospital es muy bueno," I said by way of reassuring her. I wasn't sure if it was the best hospital around, but I said so anyway. "El mejor."

She brought her head back down and nodded at me, then smiled slightly and said, "Su novia es muy bonita y simpatica." She said it slowly because she seemed to gather that my knowledge of Spanish was not at the level of Pia's, and she wanted me to understand the compliment she was paying my girlfriend.

I was about to say "Gracias" when several of the women at Jorge's bedside began calling "Lupe, Lupe," and she rushed over to her husband. He seemed to be shaking. People were asking "Que pasó? Que pasó?" Lucia came running over to me and cried, "My daddy!" Several of the Quevedo clan ran from the room. I spun for my nurse call button, wrenching my knee in its brace and causing a tearing pain that felt as if I'd torn loose several of the staples running along the remains of my patellar tendon. I found the button and pressed it over and over and over as Lucia watched me. She stood there a moment longer, then said "Daddy, Daddy" as she ran over behind the sheet to my neighbor's bed. I could see her flip flops under the curtain for a moment. Then she was out in the open again and running over to the German, who held his hands up to his face, the tubes in his arms lifting off the sheets with them. She shouted "Daddy Daddy" at him, and when he said "Nein!" and refused to bring his arms down or acknowledge her, she picked up his little white signaler and pressed for the nurse herself.

Within moments, the suppository-threatening day nurse was in the room, asking, "What's going on? All the nurse calls were going off the hook in here!" It became fairly apparent that the commotion was about Jorge, and she walked up and touched him as he quietly convulsed. Then she said, "OK, everybody out! Arriba!" and ran out of the room. None of the Quevedos left, but a few stepped back in horror as Jorge went through his body's troubles alone. Several women started weeping. Lucia clung to her mother. The nurse returned with a harried woman doctor, who took one look at Jorge and said, "OK, I.C.U., now," and along with the nurse hustled him out of the room.

The German scowled at me after the place had emptied and said, "Ve have quiet now. Ach!" I looked back at him with my own scowl, trying to make it clear from across the room that I didn't think he was being very charitable and that he could go to hell.

"It hasn't been real quiet the whole time I've been here," I said, shaking from fatigue and the effort of angry speech. "And it's not because of them that there's been a lot of noise at night so that people can't sleep."

Speaking the words made me more incensed. The German glared back at me, and there was complete silence for a moment while I shook. As I was shaking, I felt a pinch and turn in my gut, things loosening below, and I reached for my urine bottle. The German watched me for a moment longer before he began coughing and coughing. He coughed like a man who'd been smoking for three lifetimes. He kept on, harder and harder, attempting to clean out his rattling throat, and as he did this, I stopped shaking, and within a minute I'd filled my bottle near to overflowing. Exhausted from getting no sleep and eating too little and finally having my bladder empty after over 24 hours of denial, I slept, despite the Quevedo's scare and the German's coughing.

I woke up sometime that afternoon to see Mrs. Quevedo next to Jorge's empty bed, taking the crucifix off its hook on the wall. She tiptoed around the bed's edge, trying to quietly leave the room.

"Señora Quevedo," I said.

She jumped with a start before looking at me, pressed her hand to her breast and said, "Ay."

"Perdón," I said, and then because the tiptoeing around and the look on her face seemed to indicate the worst had not come to pass, I asked, "Como está tu esposo? Como está Jorge?"

"Yo no sé," she said, then said something about los doctores thinking that Jorge had a chance to be all right after another operación. She looked crestfallen and unconvinced, and she clutched at the crucifix.

I saw her holding the wooden, crucified Christ in her hands, and I wanted to comfort her with something more than my attempted empathetic expression and its haggard shortcomings.

"Para su esposo y su familia, yo voy a . . ." I said, and not knowing the word for "pray," I put my hands flat together in front of me to show what I meant. I hadn't been to church regularly for over three years, attending little more than Christmas Eve services, and I wasn't sure exactly what I believed about God, flitting in a kind of collegiate agnosticism, but I could pretend to believe in him and his power to heal if Mrs. Quevedo's fears would be eased by it.

"Oh, muchas gracias," she said, eased perhaps a little. She kissed her hand and waved it at me. "Vaya con dios, señor." And then she quietly walked out of the room, passing empty beds as she left.

It was then I noticed that my neighbors were all gone and the TV was finally off. The cotton wall to my left had been thrown aside, giving me a wide sweep of all four corners of the room. I was alone with three neatly made beds awaiting new patients. I lay there and wondered what had befallen the others. I appreciated the quiet for a moment.

The suppository nurse came in an hour or so later, cheerful and solicitous.

"Well, Foster. I saw you left me a nice present," she said, wiggling a cleaned and empty piss jar in her hand. She was as pleased as I was that there would be no threading of drainage tubes into my penis.

"Yeah," I said. "Uh, can you tell me where everyone went?" I swept my arm around the room.

"Well. You saw what happened with Mr. Quevedo."

"Yes. How is he?"

"We've got him down in I.C.U. Turns out he had a little blood clot on his brain. Surgeons worked on him and they think he'll be fine. He's stable, last I heard, but not just out of the woods yet. Lucky fella that he was here." She fiddled with some things at my bedside.

"And the others?"

"Well, Mr. Schwalbach over there got taken down for surgery, too," she said, nodding towards the German's former bed.

"Was it surgery he'd planned on having?"

"Well, no. His spleen burst."

"And?"

"And what?" Her face was stony and annoyed again.

"And . . . how did it go?"

She hesitated. "Well, I'm afraid he died on the operating table." When she saw my face, she said, "He was quite old, near 90 anyway. I'm sure he'd had a full life. These things happen and there's just only so much we can do about them. But you don't worry yourself about that. You'll be fine."

I lay my head against the pillow, feeling a bit sick, as she turned to leave the room. Then I said, "Wait, what about him?"

"Who?" she said, confused, then pointed at the mystery patient's bed and said "Him?" as if he was still lying there.

"Yes."

"There hasn't been anybody there since you've been here."

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Eventually Dr. Leary would come with my parents during the sunset that evening, and after having me chase his hand so I ended up shaking it with my own hand tangled in the bed's side bars, he'd release me and my morphine hangover to my parents' care.

But for most of the late afternoon before that, I lay alone in my room and thought about Mr. Schwalbach. I had resented his presence: his noise, his complaining, the rolling mucous of his cough, his beady black eyes, his narrow gray mustache, his refusal to make a small gesture of help for a child who was possibly watching her father die. I could believe that Mr. Schwalbach's death on the day I was in the hospital with him was inevitable, according to immutable laws, or that it was just bad timing, and not that his death had come to pass because of my behavior or my negative psychic energy. It may have been that this weak and slack-skinned patient had once been a vigorous and powerful young man in Germany, perhaps a Nazi officer or sympathizer who had persecuted Jews and who had lived out his last hours in cacophony and excruciating pain as the start of his purgatory. Or perhaps he had been a persecuted Jew himself. My dislike and lack of sympathy for him may have been either incidental or appropriate or both, but regardless, I had shown greater consideration for a man who didn't even exist than I had for one who did, and I'd thought ill of a dying man, a dying man who'd received no visitors, a dying man crying out in futility for someone to soothe him in his final hours of need, a dying man whom I had ignored and wished to hell.

I thought of these things as my knee throbbed silently, and in my empty room, I put my hands together, pressed my fingertips to my lips, and said my promised prayer for Jorge Quevedo and another for Mr. Schwalbach, recognizing as I did so that prayers for others are always partly a prayer for oneself.

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