

One Thousand and One Nights

In the beginning, she was the same age, the same height, and the same weight as the young doctor. She had come into the hospital for a broken foot that, somehow in all the commotion, suddenly became leukemia. She wore strange hats and swore she would write a book when all of this was finished.

"I'm going to call it *How I Beat Luke and Mia*," she proclaimed one day. She said things like these because she loved making the young doctor laugh, which was more thrilling than talking about her swollen feet and nausea. When her pillow became covered in hair, she declared that she was going to have the only mohawk on the hospital floor. And when the thick mohawk hair finally dropped onto the pillow, she had already moved on.

"I am buying a lobster hat," she declared to the doctor. When the large cardboard box arrived, she tore it open and wore the enormous red velvet lobster on her shorn head for several days, its clumsy claws enveloping her delicate ears.

In the beginning, she diligently made orange ribbons; she handed out yellow bracelets; she ordered a "Cancer is My Bitch" T-shirt. But most days, she lay in bed, listening to the rumblings of the heaving behemoth that was the hospital beneath her and above her. The nurses, like a collective metronome, marked the time for her. Time slowed in the early hours of the morning, accelerated around breakfast time, stalled again in the afternoon, and reached a frantic pace in the early evening. Along this base rhythm were the alternating cadences of the janitor lumbering in to empty the garbage; the birdlike movements of the social workers; and the throaty cacophony of gossiping nursing aides, who washed her with cooling sponges and arranged the straw in the water pitcher for her to grasp with chapped lips. And sometimes, a discordant high-pitched ringing would come over the loud-speaker and a robotic woman's voice would proclaim calmly, "Code Five. Code Five. Code Five." The announcement was often followed by a location, and then, after another round of discordant ringing, there would be silence. One day, she asked the young doctor what this meant, and performed her best imitation of the dispassionate robot woman, complete with the alarm sounds. The young doctor looked unsettled.

"It means that someone is not doing well," she explained, "that someone is dying somewhere in the hospital."

In the beginning, the young doctor did not talk about her own life, despite the girl's incessant desire to know where she came from, what she did when she wasn't in the hospital, whether she preferred roast beef or sushi, why she looked so tired, and whether she had ever fallen in love. The young doctor had been taught that patients do not need to know these things, usually do not want to know these things, and that patients who ask them, like museum-goers who get too close to a painting, should be gently guided in other directions.

Then, one day, the young doctor looked at her patient and saw that she appeared exhausted, her eyes sunken and haunted despite her smile and her sunny greeting. She saw that her patient's buoyant questions thinly veiled a desperate hunger for details of a life other than her own. She took off her coat, heavy with papers and instruments, and sat on her patient's bed. She told her about sledding in the snow on cardboard boxes with her husband, blueberry picking with him in the summertime, canoeing amid cherry blossoms in spring, and about the day they first met. Her patient lay back and listened to the stories with a look of relaxed contentment, whispering for another story before the young doctor left her. With each visit the young doctor made to her room, the girl pleaded for more stories about the doctor's husband. So the young doctor composed a picture of her husband's kind smile, his green-flecked eyes, his distinctive walk, his humor in the most dire situations. One day the patient asked what her husband did. Without thinking, the young doctor replied that his job was to run as fast as he could when the dreaded "Code Five" announcement flooded the speakers. Her patient was quiet for a moment.

"I hope I can meet him someday . . . outside the hospital," she murmured.

Over the weeks and months, the girl became thinner and more fragile. Her room turned into a conglomeration of wilted birthday balloons, Christmas ornaments, Valentine's Day heart banners, and shiny Easter eggs. Medications came and went. The final medication was a cerulean blue that they said would render her sterile.

"Maybe I will meet a nice and handsome man like your husband," she told the young doctor, mustering a smile. "Maybe he won't want kids, and we can have lots of really adorable dogs."

In the end, the pain rendered her unrecognizable and writhing. Pain possessed the girl's voice, her movements, wrapping itself like a snake around every thought she had, strangling them. She lost her eyesight, and when the young doctor visited, she would murmur the name of the doctor's husband over and over again, like a prayer that kept her grasping the edge of the world she had once inhabited. Her father sat by her bedside, night after night, stroking her head to calm her. Her mother stood by her bedside, day after day, and touched her like she was a part of herself—looking in disbelief, as though a part of her own body had died and she could not believe that the rest of her was witnessing it.

In the end, the same day that the young doctor's husband ran up five flights of stairs to be at the patient's bedside, the young doctor fell down a flight of stairs while tired and heading home. Several nurses heard her fall; they rushed to help and summoned a wheelchair. Immobile, propelled by invisible hands toward the bustling department of emergencies, she quietly prayed for the calm dark-

gness of the parking lot and the solitude of the silent drive home.

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