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Home From the Hospital

by Lucy Weltner

Short Biography:

Lucy Weltner attended Oberlin college, where she majored in creative writing. Since graduating, she has earned an master's degree in math teaching and worked as a middle school teacher and tutor.

Home From the Hospital

Present

A week after the end, she explores the parking lot. Snowflakes turning into raindrops and back. A mix of everything thrown around on the tar. A river sits behind the coffee shop. It looks dark and huge. When she was a kid, she would have loved this place.

There are signs that a man lives next to the river. There are a pair of stained socks slicked onto a rock, and a sleeping bag covered by a tarp. There are stuffed dirty black trash bags lumped around the shore. He sleeps in between muddy, hanging-down bushes and little jumpy sparrows. He probably washes in the river. She wants to stick her whole hand in the water. A glove of water would cover her hand, cold and total.

When she goes down the embankment, her shoes do not make any noise. She reminds herself of one of the silent birds hopping in the weeds. There are trashed alcohol bottles everywhere, touching her shoes. She bends down and picks up one of the scattered tiny vodkas.

She noticed a hawk, totally still and silent in a tree. Before the residency, she had read a book about a woman falconer who owned a goshawk. The way hawks let their claws hang down below their bellies before they strike, clenched into a ball and relaxed at the same time. And the little round eyes of a hawk, like binoculars, always gazing quietly at the far middle distance. She wondered if the man knew all the animals that lived by the river. Maybe the animals were used to him. Maybe sometimes he would get drunk and wake up with a squirrel or a mouse sitting on his face.

She used to work at the hospital. The hospital smelled like death and usually she felt like death. Dealing with it and touching it every day, she could not get it off herself, and sometimes she thought morbid thoughts. Once she saw a book of Robert Frost poems in the waiting room,

maybe left there by someone. The book open to the most cliched page, the high school poem everyone remembered: the woods are silent, dark and deep. But I've got promises to keep. And miles to go, before I sleep. She felt it acutely, and then she laughed, because empathizing with that poem was not a good thing, a poem about quietly wanting to die in the woods instead of live your life.

Past

The early mornings at the hospital were full of precise tasks, a series of missions up and down the stairs. Picking up and dropping off paperwork in a bubble of careful preparation, careful balance.

After that, visiting patients. The ones permanently on her caseload, she stole time to diagnosis and prepare for. She had wasted an hour and a half the night before reading about heart disorders, trying to come up with a diagnosis for a 65 year old with a heart condition. Not an efficient use of her few free hours.

Being able to help people is a habit. As a resident, you need to get a mess of procedures and best practices through your head and into the most intuitive part of your brain. You need to make a habit out of making the right decisions. You need to sense how the scales nudge down towards the best choice.

One of the people on Helen's caseload was a 65-year old father, the one with the heart condition she'd tried to diagnose. He was not a healthy man. He had a fat smile and streaming gray hair. He would joke about his morality, and sometimes when she put something down the

IV he'd say, "That's the stuff!" and pretend he was getting some kind of drug. He was not a bad person.

One day she went to check on him and draw some blood for tests. There was no one in the room right then, not his daughter or his wife, who were usually there, playing cards or eating.

He started coughing, she remembered it being sudden. Maybe she had her back turned when it started. He was shaking like he had something caught in his throat. His eyes slid up little by little and Helen went over and felt around on his neck and chest, checked his breathing. He was not choking. It might be an issue with nerves, or with the brain. His head vibrated when she hefted it up, strapped on an oxygen mask to keep the air flowing.

It only took a second to realize the patient was in crisis, to push the button that would call in the nurses. It was important to keep the patient upright and talk to him so he would stay awake. She said almost anything.

There was a new arrival in the waiting room, who had been acting mentally ill, who had already been waiting for 2 hours. Helen was thinking about this when the man's teenage daughter padded into the room, turning the doorknob so it made no sound. She looked at her dad, her eyes opened a little wider.

The nurses came, and Helen tried word by word to be exact about how to keep the patient from going unconscious, and what would be important to keep an eye on. In a minute the shaking petered off. The patient's breath turned slack and long – normal breathing. Normal heartbeat. Helen asked the nurses to monitor him while she brought in the new arrival.

She was telling the girl, "Your dad looks fine for now. I'm going to get Dr Anderson to check back in a minute and see about doing a few more tests."

Helen got in trouble a couple days later, when Betsy the older, fourth year resident swoops her aside in the hallway, closes the door she's about to go into. Betsy had heard about the incident from the teenage daughter. She was sure the daughter hadn't said much about her that was complementary.

"You can't just leave the nurses alone. You need to be the doctor in the room. The nurses just aren't equipped to deal with it themselves, OK?" Betsy went through the words crisply, like she needs to repeat the procedure in case Helen forgot.

"I just," she stopped and said, "I should have. I'll do that in the future."

"It's safety, you just can't leave a patient in crisis like that." Her voice was stuffed with tiny warnings. Helen nodded and waited for the time to give out an apology.

"It's OK, I don't need you to say sorry. I just need you to remember to do it next time, right? You need, you *need* to think about procedure." Over the course of a few seconds, Betsy's voice became strained, like a lecturer. "As a company, we need to trust our doctors to think about procedure."

Betsy looked at Helen and waited for affirmation. "I wish I had done things differently," Helen said, sincere this time. She did wish she had done things differently, but what did that have to do with it?

Did Betsy think that threatening her would be useful, would make her less likely to make a mistake? She was already working as hard as she could.

Present

Helen walks from the coffee shop back to her house. Her father is staying at her house. She had mostly stopped cooking, so they go out almost every night. In the morning, they unfold

the paper together and pour over the restaurant reviews. So far, they've gone to diners with trendy burger menus, hole in the wall ethnic food, lavish and spacious Italian with chandeliers hanging over them. They got fancy breakfast before they went to church.

They usually eat for a while before beginning to talk.

"Try some of my eggs?" he asks. He had ordered a huge plate of eggs Benedict, speckled with hot sauce, yolks velvety smooth.

Helen chews carefully, cuts off another bite, and soon they are full scale digging into each other's meals from across the table. Arms and forks making an X in the air. "These are great."

"Light three stars, strong two and a half stars," her dad smiles at his own joke and laughs a harsh little laugh that reminded Helen of a goose.

"You know, I was watching Bill Maher on TV last night," he pauses to dig around in his food, "He's the best man on TV, I mean he's just so smart. So funny and smart. And he's not afraid to let loose."

"Yeah?" Helen says, and then eats in silence for a while. Helen doesn't like politics, tries to 'remain ignorant' as her father would say.

"You know those rules that allow residents work such long hours," he says, "Bill Maher just tore into the people who put them in place. Tore into the whole American healthcare system."

"Careful," Helen notices herself blushing a little. "I was a part of the system."

"The issue is the top level," he says, "The thing is, that..." She listens to her father inform her about the Affordable Care Act and the attempts to repeal it. It's interesting, but it reminds her of a panic, life or death surgeries, emergencies, things that don't belong to the intellectual realm.

“People like you, working your ass off, and the government just keeps making it harder,” he says. She laughs cynically because she doesn’t know what to say.

In the afternoons sometimes they sit together and watch the news, and she watches her father’s reactions. Whenever there are two panelists arguing, she tries to see both sides of things, like a game.

Helen’s father hadn’t told her that he had a problem with alcohol until she was 14. She kind of knew, but it was also easy to consider his drinking a problem in theory, a way her family might be considered dysfunctional by an outsider. When she was in middle school, she used to pray for him to stop drinking. She had the idea that was what a good Christian child in a book would do. He began routinely disappearing to AA meetings and soon he was sipping non alcoholic beer at restaurants, which he told her tasted exactly the same.

Past

When they do the tests, it turns out the dad has a heart condition. He will need an operation, to repair one of the valves in his heart. When she tells him this, he stares like he might swallow his tongue. He looks at his wife and daughter as if they’re going to help him know what to say.

She did him a favor. “Usually, these surgeries are successful. The success rate is very high,” she smiled like a waitress.

“Well, that’s good news,” he said, or something like that, Helen does not remember exactly. When she is walking away down the hallway, she realized her eyes were tipping over with tears. It was like a dream, where something embarrassing happens in public and you don’t even notice.

Betsy came by a second later, maybe to talk to her about how it went, and she put on a convincing smile. Betsy is happy with the way she'd been handling things for the last couple days, maybe, she was interpreting things that way. Betsy glanced at the album cover displayed on her ipod.

"I love Eric Church," Betsy said, looking out at the hallway, "He's one of my favorites."

Helen smiles, "I feel like there's something authentic about his music, it's so experimental."

"Have you tried Cody Jinks?" Betsy says, in a tossed off, low key voice. Helen feels a creeping kinship with her, the sense that together they can come together and do things.

"I'll have to try him out," she answers, "I've heard he's really good." She knew Betsy was just trying to reassure her,

For a first year resident, there is only one rule: ask. Always ask. Brave the embarrassment of not knowing, turn your ego into a tiny thing, your humbleness could save lives.

But also, sometimes, there is no time to ask, and then it is your job to think fast and do the right thing. This is the catch-22 of the hospital. Always doubt, but never doubt when there is not enough time.

Helen explained to many people about how she was caught in a trap. The problem was the system. She told her boyfriend about it, on their second date. She told her dad. She told her friends, she explained it all clearly and brightly. There was no confusion, it was as obvious as snow.

Present

Finding the man by the river is kind of like finding a corpse in the river. It's there, with its sad mysteries, but in the end you kind of know what probably happened. She treated people like him sometimes in the ER. Some of them tried to impart a life lesson or tell her she was beautiful. She either blushed or stayed silent, and she sometimes hated herself for these reactions.

She walks to Stop and Shop and buys a bag of ten oranges, a jar of peanut butter and some bread. She takes them back to the river. The oranges roll back and forth inside the fake-cloth mesh, the peanut butter clunks from side to side. She feels unsteady walking down the bank and along the water.

She decides to ditch the whole bag, leave it sitting there and make a quick getaway. Maybe he would use it. She thought of leaving a note, but what would he really care about a note? What would he care who she was? She felt a pang of cynical hate, at the idea that she would want to be acknowledged, to be thanked.

She wondered if he would think God or some kind of guardian angel left the bag by the river. Or if he would think someone accidentally left a bag full of oranges, maybe another homeless person. Or if he would be too drunk or high to really wonder at all. She laughs at herself that she cares so much.

She arranges it by the riverside and is leaving, tiptoeing between the trash and patches of ferns. That's when she saw him sitting on the ground about twenty feet in front of her, bent over a cup of regular. She moves as quietly and fast as she can back up the riverbank, knowing he had seen her. *Why do homeless men always hunch over, like animals?*

She looks at the parking lot, sees a person sliding down towards her, almost in slow motion. Her hand moves across her chest for a second, she looks straight at the person, and for a second she can't think of what to say. "Hi," she said. "Hello. Betsy."

A few weeks before the end, at the hospital, Betsy had taken over for her. Helen was about to take a graft from the skin of a burn patient, using a machine called a power dermatome. It wasn't something she'd done before, so she had prepared well. Betsy, a minute before the operation, decided to take over.

She did so almost silently, looking over Helen's shoulder and scrunching her eyebrows, and then saying, "I'll do this. Stand back."

"I was going to..." Helen almost whimpered. It should have been something that she was trusted to do, by this point in her residency. When Betsy put her strong, clean hand on the machine, Helen felt at once emasculated and relieved.

"It's you," Betsy looked her up and down. "How are you doing?"

"Good, how are you?"

"I'm so glad," she smiles, "What are you up to?"

"Not too much. I'm doing well, looking for jobs." Betsy was friendly until she was pushed, and then she was cold, like so many other medical professionals. Especially the women, expected to be caring all the time. Helen knew Betsy would be working at the hospital for a long time.

But the thing was, Betsy was really good with patients. Betsy was amazing at her job, just a few calm words from her, a dose of her spiky sense of humor, and they ate right out of her hands. She was a different person, a real person with actual vulnerabilities. Helen couldn't help but sting a little under her gaze.

Helen runs up the bank and around the block, then enters the coffee shop. The door dings. They're playing "Dog Days Are Over" on the stereo, and it's about unspeakable things like political revolution and people who need to fight for survival. It seems like a sin to make pop songs about these things. Spelling out these awful ideas over a jaunty beat, *run fast for your mother, fast for your father,* who's ideas were these?

Past

It is impossible, amazingly wrong to need something from a person who is incapable of providing it. Everything requires you to get something the other person doesn't understand. You simply can't leave.

You could almost shoot it like a TV show, like one of those medical "reality" shows:

A patient arrives in the ICU who had fallen hard onto a rock. She had been skiing, and now she likely had internal bleeding. She's been rocking a little, saying things in a loud, quick blurred way. It sounds like she just bit her tongue. seems like talking is painful for her.

You find the patient's brother getting a drink of water. You make him explain that the patient has thrown up twice during the night, blood in the vomit. "Is she allergic to any medication?" you're asking, thinking that the patient will need to be put through a CT scan. To check for tears in her stomach lining.

The patient says something fast and urgent under her breath, making little furtive movements with her hands. "I think we should go home," she hisses, "I just really don't like being here right now." The sentence comes to you straight from the woman's face and caved in chest. You shake your head and realize that the woman is talking about health insurance, words stabbing the air. "We have to work it out," she's saying, "we have to work out my coverage."

You can tell by the way she holds in her stomach that she is experiencing deep pain. Probably a few dense areas of pain, on the left side of her chest. You're leaning down, to see the woman face-to-face, which you always do for patients who are mentally ill or really hurting or both, and you're telling her it's time to follow you. It's good to always be as kind as possible. The patient keeps looking at her brother, saying, "We have to check in about the thing." The sound of her voice painfully rises and scatters into the waiting room.

You speak words and sentences as strongly as you can. There's a pause where she's silent and looking away from you. You look at the brother, then you say to her, "Are you ready to go now?"

In a way, it is refreshing that the patient is so clearly out of control. It is harder, less forgivable, when the patients are resistant and picky, when they insist you don't put an oxygen mask on them. When people are very badly hurt, an asshole strain often comes out. Once a doctor overheard you calling a patient an asshole, other people thought it but you were the one who said it out loud. You felt embarrassed about it, but everyone knew it was true, pain made people assholes.

"If you don't go with me, I might have to get a wheelchair. To wheel you in." You're going to have to move to step 2, physical restraint. You look at the brother for just a second, who looks at you, then down at his sister. She starts wailing in pain, and you're in her face again, chanting and cajoling, "Calm down. Calm down for me now." She throws the cup on the floor and you pick it up and try to give it back to her.

"Do you want this? Do you want it?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry but I don't want it."

"We're going to go for a ride. Come with me and it will be OK." You are about to hold

down her arms. You call the nurses and they come.

“We’re going into a room, we’re going to check you out,” you told the patient, “Let’s go, up in the wheelchair.” Together you get the woman up into the wheelchair, who is having a tantrum, making big, frustrated sounds and throwing her head around. Everyone had to hold the patient snugly to prevent her from hurting herself.

The brother says, “You’re hurting her,” and you limply, harshly say, “I’m doing the best I can,” even though you know you are only stopping the patient from hurting herself.

You felt a kinship with the patient, a low, despairing kinship because you both had to be in this situation, in this place. You imagined yourself swapping places with her: you would be the one out of control, and she would be the one trying to run things.

At some point, the patient elbowed the nurse. In the end, you and the nurses had to basically “stuff” the patient’s legs into the chair, kind of shove in her limbs. The brother gives you a civilized, horrified look. You say, “We’re going to sedate,” and you realize you should have done that in the first place, that sedation was the solution to the problem, the procedure of what to do in this instance. You’ll realize later that you can only think of one thing at a time: the procedures or the goals, kindness or the long term implications.

By the end of the day, the patient was going to a specialist. The CT scan hadn’t showed anything and you’d finally discovered the bleeding came from a stomach ulcer. You went down the plastic-y white hall, about to tell the brother what was wrong. You used to stop and gaze at every mark on the hallway to the waiting room. You would look so intently at the ridiculous picture of water, the National Geographic- style photo of the hawk you saw every time you went in or out. You’d hypnotize yourself counting the tiny spears of feathers coming out of his yellow eyes, wondering if this was really what people wanted to see. Something so fierce and predatory.

“Did you give Doctor Raphael the test results?” Betsy asks you as she goes by with an empty stretcher. You both stand there for a second, in the space between question and answer. “Actually, I should talk to you,” she says, and shifts her eyes up to yours. You’re taller than most of the other female residents, and many of the doctors.

“I heard yelling coming from the waiting room earlier. It was so loud, I had to go see what it was. And I saw you were with a patient.” You start to think about what to own up to. Had you handled the situation well? You weren’t sure.

“I sedated her. I made sure she didn’t hurt herself,” you say.

“Actually,” you correct, “We wanted to try not to sedate, at first. It was a mistake.” You keep talking, stream of consciousness, like you’re honestly, earnestly just thinking of these things. “You were right. You know, you’ve been great at reminding me about all the procedures.”

“Think of how the patient could have made her injuries worse,” she said, then paused and continued, “Think of everyone in the waiting room who had to hear that patient,” she said, circling back to the stage of warning, of reminding. “You’ve got to think more about how what you do effects people.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” you say, “I’ve been thinking about how, as doctors, everything we do effects people.” You think about the next patient you’ll do this to, and the next, and the next. You can barely make eye contact with the edge of Betsy’s head, much less look at her full on. A few strands of her hair float in front of the hawk picture like dust motes. So you look at that.

“Oh yes, and I did get the test results to Dr Raphael,” you say. “I think the patient is going to need surgery, in the x ray one of the valves looked torn.” Betsy’s nodding, moving away, and you tag after her. You fiercely don’t want Betsy to leave, you want to stay in the

hallway under the blank light, next to the picture of the hawk. You want to stay in this place until you get something done. A dense block of something is sitting in your chest and you just need to keep talking. “There’s something else. She lost an earring on the floor of the waiting room,” you say.

It could have happened easily; the patient had on jewelry, which caught and spun under her shirt when she’d struggled. “Her brother told me that it’s a family heirloom.”

Betsy squints at you and you keep going. “I think her brother’s going to be upset if it’s missing,” you can imagine the scene, the brother’s righteousness. “I think he’ll be really upset.”

You ask, “Is there a policy about this? What should I do?” You insist, “If she lost the earring because of me, I’d be willing to pay her. I’d do it right now.”

“We can tell the custodial staff,” Betsy says, and she looks at you deeply, trying to figure out your motive. You wonder what would happen if a patient did lose something in the waiting room, something precious. Could a doctor be held accountable?

Later, the brother tells her he knows nothing about an earring, and you act confused. You say he must have found the earring later, and felt embarrassed at his outburst. You are an excellent liar, and you are pretty sure Betsy believes you.

Helen stopped in to check on one of the more permanent patients, in the late stages of chemotherapy. He was resting in-between sleep and unconsciousness, so she wrapped him up in a blanket and rolled him over snugly, checking for bedsores. Took his temperature, that was normal. Checked his vitals. It had been snowing for a few minutes. She heard people in the hall noticing. She went to the window, to steal a view of the winter wonderland happening outside, the flakes falling like fake doves. She kind of wished Betsy was there to see her and tell her off. She loved the snow, but in the hospital snow meant pneumonia. It was never good for the

homeless, the people who got sick just because they couldn't get warm. When she thought about it it made her hate herself, stubborn and obvious hate. She paced around the room twice, then left.

Once she got home, her boyfriend Paul had already come over. He had already ordered take out. They had been going out for three months, despite the fact that she has no time.

They got into an argument somehow, after the first 10 or 20 minutes of sitting down, getting ready to eat. He thought that hospitals would work more effectively with free, universal healthcare.

"It won't solve the underlying problem," she kept saying, "People would keep coming who are addicts, who need more help."

"But wouldn't it make it a little better?" he was fervent, "Wouldn't it make it so that people would get treated before the problems got to be emergencies?"

Helen almost through her fork at the wall, the metal felt good in her hands. "It wouldn't really solve the problem," she looked in his eyes, "Because we only help short term. We can't cure..." she was sure he understood. She could tell this was how Paul had decided to engage with her, through the things he knew about, through politics and popular culture.

"Maybe we should stop talking about this," she said, and cleaned up the kitchen, and put all the silverware in the correct silverware drawers.

"OK," Paul said, "You know I admire you. You do such a hard job, we need people like you."

She felt like a happy alien for the rest of that night, she felt like the whole world was a puzzle. *What's wrong with this picture?* and she could use her delicate fingers to pry out all the problems in the world.

She kept herself awake that night, sitting half-upright in bed. She was still at the hospital in her dreams. When she woke up, she usually couldn't believe she wasn't going back to the hospital. She felt phantom guilt for not being there, like she had forgotten to pay her taxes.

Tonight, she is caught in a debate in her mind: is pain is useful for anything? She can hear both sides of the argument clearly.

One one hand, people in pain do become irrational. Patients in pain snap at you, cry out, start demanding things. They defend themselves like animals. She remembers a man who came in after being hit by a truck, he kept touching her hand when she put the oxygen mask on. "I just don't like that," he'd say. "Get that off me," he said with pure irritation, reaching out like he was swatting a mosquito. Sometimes, you needed to sedate those people. It's sad to see people reduced like that. But people have visions while in pain, come to realizations. So, in some ways, pain is necessary.

Persuasive sentences and paragraphs went back and forth in her head that night. She could have moved, but she felt stuck in place, like she was half in a dream.

Sometimes, when she was just about asleep, she tried to make her body feel pain. It's something she'd done since she was a little girl, since she read that pain was all in the mind. *If I just think about it hard enough, I can make my body feel it*, she used to think, *And I'll be prepared for later, when I get hurt*. She imagined red buttons in her brain she could press down

on. She'd thinking about other people's pain, the pain Jesus felt on the cross, the pain her father felt in the morning, the pain of people starving in Africa. She wanted to know and be ready.

Present

She was in high school when she found her dad, stuck in place, one arm still on the couch. He had vomited. She had just come back from track practice. She picked up the phone right away, called 911. She lifted his face out of his vomit and she held it so he could breath. She was so strong then, like a husky, taking sports and earning good grades, praying in Youth Group, going to the Dunkin Donuts after class. What had happened to that kid, who wanted to be a nurse, who loved her friends, loved pushing her body to its limits, loved the ideas of justice and faith? What What happened to that person? What happened, was she had shed her like a skin, and the alien had come out. Now she was Helen 2.0.

A couple days later, she goes again to the river. *Guess I just can't stay away. Ha.* He had eaten Dunkin Donuts, and the napkins are all dotted over the rocks. She picks among the leaves and rocks to clean them up, and stuffed them in her pocket to throw away later. Some of them are already floating in the river, and she fishes them out with sticks. Will he notice someone was cleaning up? Cleaning up after him, like he was a dog, like she was his owner.

She goes a little further along the river. The sun sinks like a leaf in water, a seagull lets the wind take it for a ride. Birds sliding across the sky like things went past the windows of trains. She had brought a blanket this time, because it was getting cold. She didn't know what things he had and didn't had, she didn't know how destitute he was. Sometimes homeless people would come into the ER when there was nothing wrong with them, and just sit around for the warmth. The idea of that made her want to scream.

Past

At the end, Helen was called to meet Betsy in her office. Betsy had all the things she would expect someone to have: crisp comic strips pinned up, a photo of her children, cute potted cacti, everything colorful and tucked into its own nook.

“I have to talk about something with you and it’s a...personal matter. You can close the door, if you want.” Her face peered down, her eyes crisp and her cheeks brushed with blush.

“I always have...concerns about new doctors,” Betsy said, her lips and eyes moving impassively. “This is a hard job, and people let it get to them.”

Helen almost cut Betsy off. “You know, I always felt like we never really got along. Maybe we weren’t a good fit,” She picked up a cheap ass blue and orange pen that looked like a flag.

“Well, that’s one of the things you need to deal with in life,” Betsy stared at her, observed her like a cat. “Not getting along with your bosses.”

“Yes, I think that was it. I think we just have different styles.” Helen nods a few times. *All in agreement.* She ran her tongue over her teeth, *like I’m trying to clean the shit off,* she thinks.

“You’ve got to do what’s right for you,” Betsy sighed. “This is a stressful job.”

“I like the patients. I like being a doctor. Maybe it was just working here, in this place.”

Betsy sat back and observes her for a second. Helen knew she was acting like a child. But it was a fight for her ego, and she wanted it back. Helen let herself feel anger for the first time in a while. This anger was tinged with self-hate, like blood, but that was normal.

“I’m going to cut to the chase. The way you’ve been acting at this meeting has just confirmed my feeling that you’re not well enough to be working here right now.”

“I guess I don’t have what it takes,” she said. “It’s OK.” Betsy looked at her like she was surprised Helen would have admitted that.

“It’s OK, really.”

“If we had known,” she said, “We could have helped you.”

After Helen left the hospital, after she got fired, Helen couldn’t stop thinking about the afterlife. The immortality of the soul. If people were immortal, hospitals would be constant hell. Addicts and psych patients, checking in every few months, spending a few days being taken care of, never really feeling good, never really getting well. Are there souls like that, she wonders? Is purgatory a hospital?

The people who say that cutting yourself is a cry for help were not accurate in Helen’s case, she really didn’t want to be found out, she really, deeply didn’t want anyone else to know. She felt a roar of pain at the idea of anyone finding out. Everything would become more uncomfortable and difficult if people knew, she would probably never get hired again. She would never be taken seriously again. She wanted to hurt herself, yes, that may have been the main reason. Not kill herself – she had thought about it, but she wasn’t serious.

It was an accident. She was cutting herself in the bathroom, on the leg where no one would see, and she had made one cut just a little too deep. She was reckless; she hadn’t had that much time. She was about to give the father the procedure that might save his life. She was remembering the time she’d messed up, left before she was supposed to, and she was trying to relieve the tension.

She fainted in the hallway, under the hawk painting. Betsy picked her up, took her vitals, and treated her that day. It was nice to be a patient, a nice reversal. Nice to finally be getting care

instead of giving it, like a little morbid vacation. She finally got to drink from one of the straws they gave to patients.

Helen had an intermittently close friend, a boy she eventually admitted she had a crush on. She had met him after her first year of med school, while doing volunteer work at a hospital. She was lonely, working all the time, running down the set path to her residency. He was a falconer and a hunter. Apparently his father taught him to train his first hawk, falconry a skill passed down through generations. He loved to mention the habits of deer, recall memories of favorite hawks, in his deep, smiling, far off voice. He was genuinely impressed when she played the guitar at a volunteer picnic, and when he talked about it his voice softened and lowered like he was bowing down to her. He still posted pictures on his Facebook, extreme closeups of the faces and talons of his hawks, like greek statues celebrating the perfection of hawk-bodies.

She studied a lot; she was determined not to drown in the workload. She would go home and dive in, lap it up, taking each class and test in stride. At the beginning of the year, she was a B student who became an A student, because she worked hard, that was her secret. She gave up her social life gracefully, she was OK with that. She realized she was what magazines called “a striver.”

She had a dream that her dad was in the hospital, and she was healing him with falconer crush. Jaime. They did it together, by putting hawks on his chest. They had to make sure the hawk’s talons didn’t bite too far down into her dad’s flesh. Her dad would absorb the hawk energy. She lusted after Jaime so much in her dream, she wanted to put her talons in him.

When she awoke, Betsy sat by her bed, looking over her, head bowed a little, looking at the offered to bring her water, or orange juice.

“It’s OK,” Betsy said. “Do you want me to play some music? From your ipod?”

Yes. She put on Eric Church and they just listened for a while. Betsy took it in, like a critic watching a movie.

She asked Helen about the trip her and Paul had planned to go on in a few months, a trip to New Orleans. She described the museums and the music, Paul wanted to go to the home of a particular musician, a jazz prodigy. For a few minutes, she felt so eager, Betsy's voice was like the sun.

Her falconer friend talked about a state hawk he fell into, a kind of hunting hypnosis called *yarak*. Pure want, obsession, a need to chase something down and feel it die. It is amazing, he said, For the hawk, that is what it feels like to want to live.

Present

He had waited for her. He had found her. She didn't know what to say or do. He had waited for her, silent and unassuming, just sitting on the ground as she snuck through the branches. He was overweight, with dark eyes, and he was dipping his head like he was bowing. "It's you," he said, and smiled, "You've been giving me stuff!"

"Thank you, thank you," he chanted. "God bless you. You're an angel." He gazed up at her, eyes shiny like the outside of an avocado. Helen thought about the word 'angel,' the old fashioned-ness romanticism of it, the sentimentality. There was a man she didn't know, simpering in the dirt, talking like he was in love. Because she'd given him food.

"Stop apologizing," she was almost shouting. No, she had shouted. "Stop apologizing, it's fine." He stopped, then looked like he was going to start again.

“Get up,” she noticed a little egg of anger and power in her chest. Anger that this man was here, that this situation had happened in the first place. She felt the sudden urge to take what was hers. “Get yourself together. You can come to my house and have a shower. It’s fine.”

He sat on her couch and had a nap. Helen let him sleep. When he woke up, she asked him what he did, in his former life. She thought, *Well, he wasn’t a doctor, that’s for sure.*

“Well, I had a lot of a different jobs,” the man said, “I’m just on hard times. I used to be _”

“Wait a second,” Helen said, “I’m going to guess. Were you a spy for the US government?”

“That’s exactly what it was.” he laughs. “I’m undercover.”

“I knew it,” Helen felt a strange relief flood her body. “I thought you used to be someone special.” *Thank God.* She was comforted, thinking of his former life. *Of course,* she thought, *we use up people with lives and jobs and loved ones, and we leave them like this.*

“I find it amazing,” Helen said, and thought. *That you don’t kill yourself. That you live outside. That you have survived. That you don’t kill yourself.*

Past

When Helen was a teenager, she would sometimes come home and noticed her dad was sleeping. He worked from home doing data entry. Looking back, it was a great thing that he didn’t go to a regular job. So she would make dinner. It wasn’t an inconvenience, she liked it. She would listen to pop country and sing along to all the words. But when her dad realized she was doing it, he would come in thank her.

He was hardly ever visibly drunk; he talked haltingly and eloquently, and smiled while he spoke. It was just the things he said that she didn't even know how to respond to. On these days, he said, "Thank you so much. You're too good to me." How could she be too good to him? She was his daughter. She always acted in a natural way, in the way she thought was best.

He'd say, "You really don't need to do this. You know you don't need to, right? Tell me you know you don't need to." and he would look at her like it was a real question.

She'd get into the rhythm of saying things like, "It's OK, I don't mind." Over and over again, as if they'd gain some power from being repeated. Her voice always seemed quiet or mild, like the voice of a housewife, no matter what she did.

Sometimes, a string of strange, thick, ironic jokes: "I feel like I'm in the 1960s. Honey, would you make me a cocktail? Why don't I just have you serve me drinks?" And she would laugh, because she didn't know what that meant.

The next day, both of them would continue, making jokes and reading and doing work, so it never seemed like a big emergency. At night, after he'd done something strange, she'd thought about ethics, about morality. Like most Christians, she believes suicide is a sin, or at least she used to believe that. But martyrdom makes you a saint. If you want to die, you need a reason, something beyond yourself. You need to die *for* something. *You've got to want it*, she thinks, *to want it enough to put yourself into it. You've got to feel like it's necessary.*

Present

Her dad comes to check in on her around seven. As usual, he asks how she's doing while he adjusts his coat onto the rack. He makes sure it hangs right.

He comes into the room and looks back for a frame, like he's forgotten something. He shifts his legs when he sees the homeless man on the couch, like he's getting ready to drive a car. Helen suddenly thinks, what if Ken steals her laptop and her jewelry and leaves? How will she justify anything?

"Hello," he tries, and suddenly his "people greeting" smile comes on.

"I'm Ken," he said.

"Hello, Ken. Good to meet you. You can call me Jacob." The two men shake hands and her dad looks away for a second, then looks back with a steady, thin look. "I'm around here a lot. Mooching off my daughter."

The two men laugh for a second, her dad left standing up with his head tilted, giving a smile for parties and family gatherings. He almost looks like he's pressing his teeth together, just the tiniest amount. "Let me get you a beer. Or, we also have hard cider, if you prefer."

He stands by the counter and cracking a beer for Ken and mutedly arranges it on a coaster on the coffee table. He can't get one for himself, of course. "So, where are you coming from?" he asks Ken.

A few minutes later, Ken and her dad are talking about their families. Ken says he has a sister in Oregon, his parents passed away years ago. He talks with the rough sentimentality of homeless people. She wonders if she would talk that way, if she became homeless. It's impossible to imagine, but it makes her feel a kind of dread anyway.

Helen's dad gets to telling stories about her. "You know," her dad says conspiratorially to Ken, "She brought a litter of stray puppies home one day, when she was twelve. And the mother too!" he said it like a joke.

"I believe it," the homeless man cracked a smile, his face hung open. "She's an angel."

“She is,” her dad said, and there was something a little mean in his voice. “She’s a really good person. She does a lot of things I wouldn’t do.” She forgot he can get this way sometimes, towards other men.

“Do you guys want some dinner? I have leftovers,” she says. She moves to get the take out boxes out of the fridge, and almost trips over her dad’s shoes when she leaves. She lingers in the kitchen, waiting for her dad to stop talking to Ken with his guarded niceness.

In medical school, on one of the few nights she’d gone out, she’d hung out with Jaime, the falconer. They’d stayed up late getting high and telling each other stories and secrets, and she’d thought, *In another story, we’d kiss and become a couple*. But they stayed friends that night. They just talked about friends and family, and Helen ended up saying that she resents her mother for the divorce, that she likes to be alone, that she’s scared to die alone. “I like being alone, but sometimes I’m afraid I like it too much, because I don’t really want to be alone, you know?” When she woke up, he was already out feeding his falcons, and she had license to explore and mess with all the food and small objects in the house. She felt like the night before, she dressed up ordinary problems as confessions. She thinks most of what she said was true, but it still tasted like bullshit. She knew she would never make him love her with talk. How could her confessions compete with something as real as a hawk on your arm?

Coming back from the kitchen, she clears her throat and makes them look up. “Here’s the thing,” she says, “Where are you going to sleep tonight? I can take you to the shelter on Alyria St.”

Ken waves a hand and says, “You’ve already done too much.” He says, “Thank you so much, but I’m OK.”

“No,” the words come out automatically, forcefully, “I’m going to take you there.” They drive in the car. Ken stops thanking her, says nothing. The quiet seems to come from the sky, like light, and fall refreshingly on everyone.

Later that night, she is sitting with her dad, watching a news program. An ad for health insurance came on, and a little space opened up. She can feel both of them being reminded of various things. A hawk soars across the screen, strong feathers skimming the edge of the screen, then it cuts back to the silhouettes of a father and son, eyes raised to the sky.

“Betsy said once that I had to think more about what was best for patients,” Helen says.

“She did?” her dad looks at her a second, “You know, I always thought Betsy was a bitch.”

“She could kind of be a bitch. Well, you kind of had to be a bitch to be good at that job. You know?”

“Well, you know, I always wish you could have ridden it out. But I knew it wasn’t good for you. That place was not treating you right.”

Helen doesn’t think of anything but the irony that being a doctor would make you sick. He says, “You’ve always been such a healthy person. I felt like I was always getting sick from being in your elementary school, and you were always totally fine.”

She laughs. He starts telling her a story about his new boss.

And suddenly she knows it is fine with her dad if the homeless guy stays, stays forever. He could rot here. Whatever she does, he will step back; whatever she does, he will accept it, no matter how much he hates it. He is acquiescent, like an animal, like a pet.

“I’m sorry I hurt myself. You know, dad, that I’m not going to do that again.” She wants to promise again. “I won’t.”

He looks away like the subject is painful. “If you need some help, or something…”

She feels an acute pain, the pain of having done something stupid. She starts reassuring her dad, in a way he’ll understand. She says things she doesn’t actually remember later. Her dad laughs, and his face loosens with relief.

A few weeks later she is out for coffee with a new acquaintance, talking about her new job, coworkers, life philosophy. They walk out of the coffee shop, still stuck on a train of conversation, and wander down to sit down by the river. As they walk, Helen realizes she’s near the homeless man’s shelter.

She can no longer find the place where he put his clothes. Searching the dirty places between trees, she doesn’t see any bottles. They skirt around the bank, and she gets the feeling that he is maybe dead. Maybe he has died here. Maybe a body in the place where the ground dips, between the river and the road. An easy place for a body.

She stops listening to her friend, she stops rubbing her empty coffee cup. She clears off a place with her foot, still scanning for bottles or food. Or a lump that might be a body. *I’m making a grave*, she thinks, confused, and then, *Well, it’s a grave for whatever happened, it’s a grave for dying, or for moving on.*