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Cut and Run

by Hamish Rickett

Chapter One

My cases, they've gone on to recover. Picked up their crutches, their prescriptions with instructions stapled to white paper sacks, their pills tucked into bottles with childproof caps. Even now, my hernias, my hips, my gallbladders are being seated in wheelchairs, delivered to curbs. Helped into cars by waiting loved ones, else put on medical buses, holiday vans and shipped home, post-haste, lest they die on our watch.

Mine was a transactional generosity, if I was honest with myself, which, let's face it, none of us ever are. Everyone's generosity hinges on personal gain. True generosity—of the type one never sees—expects no recognition, no return, no benefit. A selfless act? No. I'm afraid the self was all too present.

As Maggie had refused my request for one last favor, I'd driven myself. Both knew it was

a ploy anyway. Fuck, Jonah, get a cab.

I pulled into the airport's long-term parking with time to spare. Maybe not the three hours the team leaders requested, but still, plenty of time. I double-checked my passport and caught the shuttle to the terminal. There, I was relieved to find that everyone else had gone on to the gate without me.

Through security, the TSA officer was unfazed by my little plastic-wrapped pallet of 200 fentanyl vials snuggled down in my carry-on bag. A donation bought with my own money for the trip. I held the DEA forms in triplicate carbon but no one asked for them. That I'd purchased the fentanyl triggered something in my brain. Wind up, I'd heard the chronic pain neural pathways called—like springs of a clock or a toy—the feedback loop like a well-dipping bucket.

In the bathroom stall, I ignored the texts and voicemails, letting Lito Barriento's "Cumbia en do Menor" play on loop. Clarinets fluttered and trilled, up and up, while insistent bass urged forward motion. Over it all, the singer's voice shouted, driving the Cumbia music in through my ear buds—Agoo-ha!

My focus wavered a moment as the trumpets barged in, blaring.

Fuck it, I thought. The needle bit, found roof, cavern of vein and I plunged—all in.

Stony-faced delivery over the plate. Solid thump of arrival into the strike zone. Dopamine squeeze-play.

Even as the fentanyl razored my thoughts neatly in two, the music swallowed me up and carried me away.

With a big shuddering breath, I came to in the airport bathroom stall. My face stuck with sweat to the taupe paint defaced by guys before me. Woodies, dicks and hairy snatches; phone numbers, arrows, a web, a sequence of layers and insult. Joe to RACHEL and on to M-a-r-y who was in need of... something scratched out, and next to it the head of a long-toothed rodent with large staring eyes. Up close, I admired the lines scribed with economy and precision. Traced them. Why couldn't I create something? More and more I felt just a technician, not a doctor at all. Certainly not someone who could create anything of beauty. My eyes followed the jizz trails down the bathroom stall's door.

The sounds of running water and the hot-air hand dryers' roaring brought me back to myself.

Jesus.

I shook my head of its spiders. Rolled my sleeves down. Stood. Flushed. Maybe still time to make the flight. Patted pockets to make sure I had everything.

At the gate, they clustered together in their matching team shirts—purple this year—a team of grapes. Team Go-Getter! Or was that last year's slogan? I don't know. I'd missed the final team meeting.

A few gave me looks. I didn't have on the right color, never mind I still wore a Mercy Missions team shirt—from the black year. Perhaps they'd burned theirs.

I'd even booked myself on the official team flight this year, a concession to Scott and Bella's security concerns. There'd been a tightening, was less tolerance for individualism, for deviating from the team's itinerary as in past years.

"God! There you are!" Amie said. "What happened to showing up three hours before the flight? You're lucky it's delayed." In her late thirties, there was something alluring and bat-like about her dark-complexion and membranous skin. A kickass nurse, but since moving into management there'd snuck in a bossy resentful demeanor. I didn't blame her, knew the stuff she put up with. Roaring drunk, one of us made a pass at the other during one of these trips. Neither of us had talked of it since, not embarrassment, but something we hadn't wanted to examine more closely. Both married, living our tidy lives. We would only have invoked kids, extraordinary circumstances, and the universal fallback of the fearful—if only.

"Coffee?" I pointed towards the kiosk. Overhead they announced general boarding of our flight.

"What? Now?" Amie looked back towards the group—they'd all joined hands and were beginning a last prayer before boarding. Jeremy, holding hands with a particularly eager young surgeon, shot us daggers.

"You never change, do you Jonah?" She looked me up and down. "But you're okay?"

"Just tired. You know how it is."

Following me she said, "God, was my husband pissed on the drive here. It's not like it's a vacation or anything."

As we stood in line for coffee, she fidgeted and looked over her shoulder in the direction of the gate.

"You're lucky to have someone to drop you off," I said. "He's just going to miss you."

"Of course you're right," she said making a visible effort to relax. "Your wife busy?"

"Something like that." I ordered a plain black coffee. Hot. I wanted to cauterize

something inside.

"But it's always the same," she went on. "He just doesn't get it, how hard we work. He even accused me of invoking, 'It's a good cause' as a *weapon*, can you imagine?"

I nodded. While we did work hard, it didn't feel exactly like work. Nor was it a vacation.

Overhead they announced our final boarding call.

I could see it as a weapon though. Perhaps something we all did. Something I'd wielded against Maggie I supposed.

On the way down the jetway, Amie asked, "Really, are you feeling alright? I mean, you look a bit..." she trailed off.

I strained a mouthful of coffee through my teeth. "Just coming down with something I think."

In the plane, we passed by our team leaders, Scott and Bella, and my colleague, Jeremy, where they sat in first class.

"Nice of you to join us," Scott said.

Jeremy lifted his wineglass in salute. "Doctor." What do you call the person in medical school who has the lowest GPA? Yup. Doctor.

I made my way to the back. It was a minefield of greeting. Like Whack-a-Mole with the purple shirts scattered throughout the plane. Amie hugged each of those seated in the aisle. I nodded to a few. I envied her enthusiasm, every trip like a high school reunion. Myself, there was some reserve I couldn't let go. Right now, all I wanted was to find my seat and sleep. I wedged myself into a window seat, relieved to be seated next to strangers.

In Houston's airport, we ate beneath an embalmed fish. Beaked torpedo with tail and razor fins. "Wahoo!" the plaque proclaimed. The menu failed to offer anything remotely as enthusiastic. Tilapia—best they could do.

"Raised in choking clouds of shit," said Jeremy who'd recently turned vegetarian. "Mind you, sustainable and certifiably green." Good Portland boy.

"It tastes muddy," I said, swilling the last bit of beer in the bottom of my glass. A few new team members sat at the periphery of our group.

"New surgeon?" I asked, looking towards one of them. "What happened to Sloan?"

"Ripped up his knee skiing," said Amie. "Crutches for two weeks and then surgery. Crutches for another four after that."

"Ouch."

Jeremy took a long draught of beer. "But then he's got Sierra, to nurse him, might almost be worth it."

"What?" said Amie. "You Catholic guys don't get enough?"

"Strictly by the calendar. Rhythm fucks."

"There's this new medical device," said Amie. "Maybe you've heard of it? A condom?"

"Fuck you," he laughed. "I need to get snipped before we've got a complete menagerie on our hands. Only, without Becky knowing. Though, as long as she can deny knowledge, I think honestly she'd be okay with it."

"Ask Cruz," I offered. "She might do it."

Jeremy looked over his shoulder towards the table where the new surgeon—cross-fit type I'd guess—talked with Cruz.

"She's always happy to stick it to the Pope," I said.

"Who's she with?" asked Jeremy.

"Don't know him. Lambros, I think someone said."

"Goddamned Sloan. How could he leave us like this?"

"Be happy we still got Cruz."

"He's not hitting on her is he?" Jeremy shook his head. "The shit she puts up with."

"And, she'll have to pick up his slack if he's a tool."

I woke to the bump and screech of tires as the plane set down in the dark. The woman next to me repositioned her head on my shoulder. She had her legs pulled up beside her. We had chatted a little before, her job something to do with textiles. Turning to look across to the aisle, my lips brushed her hair. The smell of her otherness startled me. I'd missed the warm weight of a head on my shoulder. How used to one person I'd become. My wife had once expressed an interest in these trips but I'd failed to bring her and she began viewing them as an annoyance, something to be suffered through. For a good cause, I'd insist. What? Not enough suffering around here for you? But she'd said that kindly enough.

This trip had come at a bad time. Maybe should have canceled. Maggie had asked me to move out a few weeks ago, keeping the kids with her. I was still reeling, trying to regain footing. I hoped this would work as a distraction.

When the lights came on, the woman sat up. "I'm sorry, have I been like that the whole time?"

I shrugged. "Don't worry, I was asleep as well." She bobbed her head in thanks, for

complicity in a small kindness.

On the ground in Guatemala City, the rat maze of plywood construction had disappeared and in its place white marble gleamed as far as the eye could see. Sealed, cooled, scrubbed of humidity. An airport like any other. How disappointing. If I was honest with myself, something I took pains to avoid, part of these trips' thrill was the Third World, its otherness. Remove that and it became just work, volunteer charity work which made a small difference, but still, work.

Sweat pricked my forehead and there was a faint hunger growling. Running on fumes. The few remaining fentanyl molecules knocked around still, displacing my endorphins from their mu and kappa tufts. It startled me the way they made themselves at home like they'd always lived there.

The team gathered in front of the bathrooms before going through customs.

I drained my bladder, avoiding the bathroom stall. My shirt stuck to my back even with the cool air. My airspeed was dropping. The laminar wing-flow peeling off, heading for a stall. I reminded myself, once doesn't make you an addict.

Shuffled through immigration.

Purpose of visit? Medical mission. *Medico*? The immigration officer looked up, doubtful. Don't suppose I inspired confidence in my current state. But she stamped my passport and called for *el proximo*.

There had been a time when our plane captains introduced us as guests of honor. Now in Guatemala one sensed a fatigue with our presence. Why were we still here? Why were we still needed?

I pulled my carry-on behind me. The wheels ran quietly over the large marble tiles. The cost lavished on the place bothered me. At the baggage carousel I joined the others, pulling off our large black plastic trunks, not so much to be helpful but to provide an excuse for my sweating. That gnawing. It felt like bucking hay bales, and bucking the cliché waiting for me: drug addicted anesthesiologist. I felt dangerous—loose canon dangerous. Maggie had once made the observation about my rafting with a friend, that maybe it wasn't smart to travel with someone going through a divorce. There was a recklessness to them, an instinct to seek out danger. Maybe not so much that they sought to put themselves in harm's way, but their calculus of risk had cracked. Was askew. She'd not commented when I'd said I was still doing this trip. My answer that I'd already paid for it was going to be inadequate anyway. Mercy Missions didn't pay its doctors to go, they leveraged donations to the hilt. Just as I felt, emotionally leveraged to the hilt. Like I said, dangerous.

We stacked the trunks filled with our medical supplies four high on the carts wheeled in by a couple of in-country Mercy Missions workers. Luz Elena and a guy I didn't recognize.

The customs official waved us all through, having eyes only for our trunks. The government levied a 10% tax against the value of all the supplies we brought in, never mind all of it had been donated. This was a new development, someone in the government recognizing an opportunity to enrich themselves, even if it was all to be used to care for the people the government had no intention of helping themselves. The customs official went over our manifest and checked it with the trunks, of course having no idea what any of it was. The fentanyl in my carry-on bags went unnoticed.

On the far side of customs, all pretense of cool elegance fell away and we stepped into Third World night. Past the gauntlet of taxi hucksters and bored drivers with their placards and the usual crush of waiting families. We collected next to our bus under cover of the large roof attached to the airport that looked like nothing but an enormous lean-to. The night air smelled of jet fuel, burning garbage and something sweet beneath it all—like night blooming jasmine, or something rotting. Like sex or shit on your fingers—couldn't tell which when faint. Like perfume.

Our bus burned with painted flames: orange and red on black, fanning to the rear. Maria was its name, all the buses had names, female names. After having done service back in the States for a generation of schoolchildren, they fled south to suffer refurbishment, artistic embellishment and christening. Christ's mother no doubt flattered to have a bus named after her.

"What are the police for?" asked a team member I'd not met. "They are police, right? *Policía?*"

He looked familiar, one of the new people.

"It's Chad." He put his hand out for me to shake. "And you're Dr. Brockton? Team doctor, right?"

"Call me Ishmael," I said. He looked confused. "Joke. Call me Jonah."

Behind our bus idled a black police pickup truck. In the dim light and with its tinted windows, there was no seeing in.

"Mercy Missions pays them to escort us to Antigua. Just cautious is all. No big deal." A surfeit of caution, but I understood the calculation: cost of prevention versus cost of an event. Not that Mercy gave a shit about us. I was replaceable, a widget. But what was not replaceable

were the donors if something happened to us and it splashed big enough to scare them away. That, God whispered, wouldn't do. To the cause. To the mission. Heaven, after all, waited for us all. The dollars however, would be vacuumed up by a competing charity and lost forever. Non-profit charity hardball. We were pawns, appreciated, lauded, prayed over—they reminded us constantly—but pawns nonetheless.

So why come at all, if I'm going to be such a prick about it? Just my world-weary traveler schtick—my defense against feeling. These trips mattered more to me than I liked to admit. The surface do-gooder aspect went over well with my liberal friends and family. My parents lauded these trips, tweeted their friends, held me out as evidence of a proper upbringing, but it was more complicated than that.

Our bus, God's mother, lurched out into Guatemala City's streets after Scott and Bella gave us a little rah-rah pep talk for having arrived safely, "We made it! Thanks to our amazing interpreters, blah, blah, etc." You can imagine how it went.

Fifteen years coming on these trips and neither Scott nor Bella spoke much more than greeting pleasantries in Spanish. It was easy to poke fun at them, nor were they averse to mocking themselves. To be fair, they were great. God knows I would be incapable of doing what they did. Did little enough, aside from serving as team doctor.

I attended to people's personal ailments, mostly doling out antibiotics and Imodium for when people came down with traveler's diarrhea. Why Scott and Bella chose an anesthesiologist for the task didn't make a ton of sense, especially as we often had along an internist as well. But yeah, it was the least I could do, knowing how much they did, how much of the year they devoted to getting us off the ground.

Seated beside me, Chad looked a little shell-shocked.

"Worst part's over. Get a little shut eye. When you wake up we'll be in Antigua."

He grimaced and checked his phone for service.

We passed modern hotels, European car dealerships, malls that would have looked at home in any upscale American city. Only as we left Guatemala City's urban core did the character change and become more what I associated with Central America: endless ramshackle businesses jumbled together with their signs in aqua, fuchsia, tangerine and yellow. Upper building levels unfinished, a jumble of rebar and concrete blocks, plastic cisterns. Not that my Spanish was great, but I could decipher some signs: plumbers, pharmacies, carpenters, electricians, iron workers, auto repair and a surprising number of tire repair shops always with a tire out front splashed with the word "*Pinchazo*." The metaphorical hiss of leaking air.

Chad kept looking round to check that the police still followed behind. I didn't tell him, there'd been a bus-jacking last year and a bunch of poor Guatemalans killed, a revenge killing for the bus driver having failed to pay protection money to a narco gang. The American government travel website listed Guatemala as Level Three—Reconsider Travel. Not a Four, but still.

Almost clear of the city, we drove past the textile sweatshops, American corporate compounds, chemical plants, refineries—all gated, fenced and manned with armed guards. Even the gas stations had someone standing guard with a gun of some kind, sawed off shotguns the weapon of choice.

Now the bus down-shifted as we left behind the city and began climbing into the highlands towards Antigua. Tight switchbacks slowed our bus, so that pickup trucks and

occasional late model German cars swerved around us, their exasperation clear. Some honked.

Beside me Chad fell asleep. The churn of conversation died except for a pocket of nurses in back working something over. I could do without the drama that sometimes accompanied these trips. Despite all our best intentions, or because of them, tensions sometimes ran away with us.

I peered out the window like so many schoolchildren who'd ridden this bus back in the States. We weren't that different as adults with our cliques and intrigue. What the fuck was I doing here? I'd not even said goodbye to Rose and Dylan. Things conspired. Work. Maggie. My avoidant personality. My discomfort. My outsourcing of parenting to Maggie. Off-shored my heart to some place I'd not have to deal. My back, and Morris uncomfortable refilling my Percocet. I was a slow motion accident in progress.

And, of course, my own worst enemy. Difficulty letting up off the gas. Hard driving, Maggie always chided me. Enjoyed doing difficult things, she said. Always learning, I countered. Now I just felt pathetic. Maybe all I needed was a break. These trips usually did that for me. Reset things. Settled priorities back into order.

Usually, the cooling night air and thickening darkness with its foreign smells filled me with expectation. Now, they troubled me. The small roadside shacks selling pop, snacks and fruit, felt shameful, teetering on desperation. The billboards for the few gated communities rang hollow and hypocritical, sinister even. The truth was out there in the dark and broken forests, in the plywood and scrap-iron shelters, in the goats' eyes staring from the dark.

We drove past coffee plantations and their dusty alien leaves lit up as we made sweeping turns around hillsides. With the bus's lurching I found myself searching for a horizon line in the

dark, trying to shake the nausea that had crept up. The police truck's headlights shone through the back windows at unpredictable moments like an interrogation.

I woke to the bus shuddering over a series of *topes*—the mountainous Guatemalan speed bumps. People in the back shot up like play people in a push toy. Dylan and Rose had laughed themselves silly at a certain age, pushing their toy back and forth, some cam popping little people up like kernels of popcorn. That had been years ago. Little made them laugh like that now.

The bus turned off the highway and entered the narrow cobbled streets of Antigua. The driver swung the bus around a few turns and pulled up in front of our hotel, *La Quinta de las Flores*. He honked twice and a night guard swept open the tall wooden gates.

Scott stood and reminded us that tomorrow would be the only day to sleep in for the week, late DIY breakfast seven until nine. He encouraged us to attend the hospital tour at ten. "So keep it down in the morning as I'll be sleeping in." Despite the late hour and the team's fatigue, there were a few chuckles about Scott and Bella's likely activities in bed not involving sleep. I envied their shared focus. It kept something lit within them.

The team made quick work of unloading the bus—our medical trunks having made their way by truck to the hospital with Luz Elena. There followed the usual scrum of figuring out rooms, who went where, who was with whom. New team members went into shared rooms along the breezeways while us regulars were put in casitas.

It all felt a world away from home, the tall-ceilinged white-washed casitas clustered around the central brick courtyard with its fountains and raised flower beds of lilies and birds of

paradise. The sound of running water, usually soothing after the hours of jet turbines and diesel engines, now only reminded me of my full bladder.

I trudged up to dump my stuff in my room but found a tall older guy standing in his underpants in the room. I'd forgotten Scott had warned me that he might be assigning a new teammate to our casita. But this? Fuck.

"Dr. Brockton?" He extended his hand. "Hi, I must have missed you at the final team meeting. Been looking forward to meeting you."

"Excuse me would you?" My full bladder rudeness went unnoticed and he launched into a philosophical monologue that might have been lifted straight from his health system's statement of purpose. He was a hospital administrator. WTF, Scott? I thought, shaking the guy's hand as he stood too close in his underpants. He explained that he was in charge of the system's outreach program and was on a reconnaissance trip of sorts.

I didn't need this. My reserve was petering out and I felt like a kid, nearly crossing my legs to keep from peeing my pants.

Pleasant, tall, soft-spoken, early sixties, close-cropped gray hair, glasses and had a vagueness to him. He said he'd asked for the assignment but I wondered if he had the start of something neurologic, degenerative. Seemed like the hospital system might have pushed him out of the administration gravy-train procession line in which everyone takes a step to the right towards ever larger salaries until they're handed their golden parachute and told to jump. Maybe he'd been told to jump.

He was in the throes of bedding down for the night having already unpacked. When I suggested he take the far bed lest my later nights wake him he went quiet, seemed bothered. So I

set my suitcase next to the far bed, said good night and fled.

Like a dog used to its crate, I retreated to the confinement of the casita's tiny washroom tucked under the stairs. Pissed sitting down. For...stability. Examined the punctate needle mark, start of a small bruise. The smell of shit wafted from the wastebasket. We weren't supposed to flush toilet paper, would clog the system. Shit smell and a fentanyl longing.

I'd experimented with fentanyl a couple times in residency—before Maggie. Youthful exuberance and a reckless high, to have gotten into med school. Now, I told myself, was just to get through a rough stretch, and my back. I knew I'd been lucky not to get sucked in residency. Knew the dangers. Had a classmate die. And the tech found dead in a broom closet with an upended bottle of Forane. Over the course of my career, colleagues died unexplained deaths. I saw the devastating fallout, not covered up exactly, but not fully examined either. Physicians' herd mentality. That wouldn't happen to me. That happened to the weak, the peripheral, the unworthy. No one said this out loud but we knew it: *None of us is immune.*

Residency uncoupled something. Maybe there were connections we should have remembered. It started in medical school but residency completed it, transposed vital conduits the way a congenital heart defect can, the great vessels plugging in, draining what should be filling. Hubris and arrogance swelling up in the pipes while humility spilled into dirt. Even the female physicians took on this mantle of exceptionalism, of elitism, our witchy brotherhood. We fostered it, taught it to each other, handed it down generation to generation. Parts of us turned crippled and stunted even while we believed in the burgeoning, all-powerful medical mind growing within us, that fine instrument of deduction and diagnosis. Shit. You couldn't turn the fucking thing off. A garden hose thrashing and pissing all over the place like a headless chicken.

This all churned through my pinkish gray organ perched up top. I sighed. I was exhausted but knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. The brain perseverated on more fentanyl. Some other part of me urged caution and restraint. My heart? My spleen? Maybe the gut or the solar plexus—whatever the fuck that was, sounded morally important, as though it knew better, was lit up with righteousness.

But I felt the need in the bones. *Los huesos*. Ahh. My Spanish returned in little spurts. Always when least needed, never arriving in time otherwise.

Sin gelo. That I could remember. No ice. For the mojito. But it needed ice. Figured the alcohol would kill the cooties, the coliforms. I climbed to my feet, swayed, managed to flush.

I crossed ceramic tiled floors, passed the living room with its Mayan fabrics, paintings, fireplace, a rollaway set up for someone, kitchen with its carboy of filtered water squatting over its porcelain spigot.

In the courtyard, the fountain went on splishing, the hush and peace nibbling ineffectually at my riprap shore, went in search of a drink, something to drown the fizzing neurons, toss a calming blanket over my squawking parrot cage brain.

It surprised me to find, even at this late hour, someone tending bar.

"*Buenas noches*," the bartender said, smiling.

As we shook hands, his name came to me.

"Eduardo, *como está?*" I ordered a Gallo and asked after his kids. They all had kids, right? God what a fucker I'd become. But he had two, another on the way. He mimed a woman heavily pregnant, and put his hand to his back and winced. I laughed, wishing my Spanish was

better. Those had been hectic magic years. Life simpler. He handed me the beer jacketed in a white paper napkin. The amber bottle had made the recycling rounds so many times that it had taken on a ground-glass appearance. My wife had been radiant when pregnant. Had glowed and hummed with life's potential. We'd fucked so hard and so often that she'd eventually asked her OB if it might harm the baby. I could still remember that smirk she wore when she'd returned home. God, what had happened?

I charged it to *Casita Dos*, wished him luck, and made my way over to the thatched open-air shelter just around the corner from the bar. Someone had lit a fire and it crackled in the corner fireplace. I stood with my back to the fire welcoming the warmth.

Bella, a few more nurses, Jeremy and Cruz sat talking, their voices just audible over the fire's crackling, everyone else having gone off to text their loved ones that they'd arrived safely, before going to bed.

I sat next to Cruz on one of the cushioned bench seats beneath a collection of Mayan masks that cast shadows on the white plaster wall. We clinked bottles. She was mid-thirties, raised in LA by recent Colombian immigrants, spoke fluent Spanish, but more importantly was a wonderful surgeon. Envious skills, rock-solid judgment and a shining bedside manner. She'd only been coming on these trips a few years but fit like a glove. I wasn't sure how she found the time with a full-time practice and two children at home but we were blessed to have her.

"*Bienvenidos a su casa,*" she said.

"That's easy for you to say."

"I hear you. You're getting better."

"Gracias," I nodded. "But you're right, it does feel like a homecoming of sorts." I wished

I believed that.

"To our alternate selves then," said Bella. "At last."

"We owe you," said Jeremy.

"You do! More than you realize. If some of you didn't kick ass in the donation department I think they'd come down on us harder. As it is, Scott has to run interference for you all."

"Us?" I asked. "I seem to remember a couple doing an amazing rendition of something between a Greek wedding and a Roman orgy last year while you renewed your wedding vows here. Followed I might add, by you pretending to give birth on the dining room table."

She laughed with a shriek and covered her mouth, looking over her shoulder towards the casitas. "Scott made me promise I'd keep it down." She whispered, "I have to be back in bed before midnight."

Mercy Missions' teams all stayed at the same hotel, 32 teams in a year and our team had the dubious distinction (Scott's words, despite their unorthodoxy, he and Bella were being drawn into the Mercy Missions mechanism and so heard about its concerns) of racking up the highest collective bar tab every year. By a long shot. Wasn't even close. Nor were we a particularly large team. Maybe because our brand of Bible thumping just so happened not to include teetotaling as well. There was a reason the bartender was happy to see us.

I leaned back against the wall drinking my drink, listening, waiting for buoyancy.

"Do you think medicine has made us difficult people to live with?" asked Cruz.

"That old saw? I don't believe it," said Bella.

"That's easy for you to say, you're married to the medical mafia," said Jeremy.

"You calling Scott a hit man?"

"He's a surgeon isn't he?" laughed Jeremy.

"It's like we've been taught to keep our best selves for our patients, for work," Cruz went on.

"So then, what's this? What are we? Work or family?" asked Bella.

They discussed plans for tomorrow, the free, get-acclimatized day: gifts for family, coffee for donors, jade shopping, a Cuban cigar run. People discussed the relative merits of lunching at Cafe Condessa (sangria) versus Frida's (margaritas). Talk turned to end of week plans when some of the group had booked a guide to take them to the top of Acatenango, one of the volcanos that made up the saddle of three among which Antigua sat—sunrise at 13,000 feet and a view overlooking the active volcano, Fuego.

"Just don't get yourselves killed, all right?" said Bella. "Maybe you could go under false identities? Would that be too much to ask?"

I laughed along with them but felt peripheral. I'd failed to join in with the logistics and realized I'd been dropped from the emails.

"You know it's not as bad as all that," someone said.

"I know, but Scott worries."

This wasn't something I'd thought about.

"Have your fun but text us when you're boarding your flights or he'll be a wreck. Really. Someone held up the Sky Bar last year. Robbed everyone on the rooftop."

"Is this what the Mercy Missions conferences teach you guys? Buzz-kill 101?"

Silence.

"Yes, well," Jeremy cleared his throat. "Anyone know the procession schedule?"

"Yes, let's talk processions," Cruz said. "We can't break tradition and allow Bella to return to her casita without forcing Scott to come out in his boxers and scold us at least once."

Bella smiled but I could tell she meant it, if not about us, at least about Scott.

"Dude, you're awful quiet," said Jeremy.

"What? God, I'm beat." I'd drifted off, imagining sitting on the toilet lid, rolled up sleeve, Dylan's bike pant-leg strap cinched around my biceps. 30 gauge needle, imagined the prick, brief crimson flash, pushing off. But that moment of earth-moving exquisiteness and trilling of clarinets wouldn't last. A repeat would only get me the dregs of a bass line. Little cousin to that first feeling. But, still, wouldn't I feel more able to live in my skin?

I shook my head. The trip was feeling like an elaborate gun to my head. I was at a loss to explain it. There were lots of reasons. There weren't any reasons. I viewed it as an unnecessary question. One to be avoided. It would lead to nowhere but sitting on the toilet with a needle in my arm, the smell of shit wafting from bathroom wastebaskets.

Chapter Two

I woke to the calls and whistles of birds I didn't have names for but who'd set up shop in my head. Scratchy bird feet and feathers ruffled the beginning of a headache but I felt an unusual calmness. Like waking in someone else's body. Everything moved of its own accord but at some remove.

An occasional passing car emphasized the quiet. Saturdays, usually mad dash to soccer, barely time for breakfast, errands in between games, but then I remembered last weekend and a metastasizing silence when Maggie had thrown me out. I checked my phone. No word from her.

My roommate, Mark, continued to sleep, snoring softly, his day's clothes set out on a chair next to his bed.

I sighed. Despite feeling that Scott had made a mistake inviting him, or at least saddling me with him, I felt something sad seeing Mark there in the newborn daylight. Not innocent like when children slept but like he'd become unmoored. Had lost his way somehow. Was floating. Something not entirely right with him. A melancholy.

Head under the covers to screen out the building daylight, I tried to doze but my headache and gnawing stomach made sleep impossible.

A soft knock on the door. Jeremy had a WTF look on his face pointing at Mark who still slept despite the daylight and the bathroom sounds beginning next door.

In the shower I washed the sweat from the previous day's travel. The mark over the cephalic vein was faint. Maybe I'd imagined it. Afterwards I made an abortive attempt at a shit, pushing from my mind the memory of the airport bathroom stall. An aberration.

I brushed my teeth, and I felt somewhat more human despite the headache.

"Why didn't they stick him with pharmacy dude?" Jeremy asked in the courtyard outside.
"I mean, you and me, right?"

"Never mind. Not worth switching now."

"Your call, you're the one that has to deal with Captain Underpants."

"He's not so bad. Just there's a vibe. Something not quite right."

"Like what?"

"Like there's a screw that's been overtightened. Early Parkinson's maybe?"

"Poor guy."

It was too early for flip-flops really, the dew on my bare feet cold as we crossed the lawn to grab coffee. It would warm up. Usually did. Breakfast was a skeleton affair—no one gone provisioning yet. On the horizon, *el volcan Fuego* simmered, a choker necklace of clouds angling up into an otherwise clear sky.

Jeremy tipped an imaginary hat to the hotel's guard manning the gate and we stepped out

onto the brightly lit street.

"How's Maggie?" he asked as we rounded the corner past the furniture maker's shop, its windows barred and shuttered. "The kids still playing soccer?"

"Ahh, they're okay." On the sill a potted crown of thorns plant sat, its blood flowers like puckered lips on the end of a spiky trumpet. "I guess." The plant reminded me of a friend's botfly larva having to be cut out of his lip, that moment when something moves inside that wasn't you. A possession of sorts, a minor one. One hoped.

"You guess?" He stopped to let a whole family on a motorcycle pass before crossing to the other side. He waited on the curb for me. "Something going on?"

"Trip's come at a bad time is all."

He nodded. "Feels more and more like there's never a convenient time to leave the family."

We threaded our way through *el parque central* and Guatemalan families who seemed content to spend the morning strolling beneath the jacaranda trees' purple blossoms and lounging on the wooden benches next to the stone mermaids in the park's fountain.

"Home sometimes feels like a fire station." Jeremy shook his head to a young Guatemalan woman selling bracelets. "Calls going out, fires, emergencies, cats in trees, burning houses, clown cars. Just missing a fire pole."

"How many kids do you have now?" I asked.

"Five."

"I admire that about you. Don't care about what's fashionable, just getting on with life."

"Fashionable? What's that got to do with anything?"

I shrugged.

We crossed to the Cafe Condessa and made our way through its bookstore to the cafe's patio in back.

A serious young man with an elfin chin seated us towards the rear of the restaurant's courtyard, its tables occupied with a mix of well to do Guatemalans, tourists and a few ex-pats recognizable by their complete disdain for everything going on around them. Jeremy tilted the umbrella to shade the table as the sun was now hot. "Kid that seated us, think he's got some syndromic thing? Pierre-Robin maybe? Bad news if you had to intubate him."

"Tough intubation for sure," I said sitting down. "Ever wish you could turn that off?"

He laughed. "You mean checking out people's veins and airways instead of their... Gracias." Our waitress set before us menus and we each ordered sangrias. "Other attributes?"

"Well, that but I guess what I really mean are deeper things, more subtle changes. Maybe you don't experience this, but I find there's a reserve, something prevents me from joining in, can't shut off the vigilance. The constant watching and waiting for the worst to happen. Dreading it and at the same time never satisfied until it does happen. You don't ever find that bleeding into your regular life?" The waitress set before us sangrias the size of fishbowls. I took a long drink, the chunks of fruit bumping into my nose. The warmth felt good, both the sun's as well as the wine starting to sink in.

"Well, Becky's given up asking me to look at the kids when they're sick. If they don't need an ICU and a ventilator, I'm like, they're fine. So they have strep or whatever, but it's not like they're *dying*."

"Oh, god. That is so true. Do you remember that allergist that put his own kid into

anaphylaxis prescribing, antibiotics was it?"

Jeremy laughed out loud. "Didn't he do it like three times?"

"God, that's classic. Like we've got blinders. But you think that happens on an emotional level as well? I sometimes feel like I've got emotional Parkinson's—that blunt affect. I mean, we've seen so much fucked up shit that it takes more to get through don't you think? Like strep throat, but with emotions. Everything's even-steven, and only when real shit hits the fan does it get your attention. Had that beat into us, don't freak the little stuff. Cool under pressure to that point that maybe you're a little emotionally dead. Nothing rattling us when maybe it should."

Breakfast arrived, a continental Central American thing. Pastries, frijoles, plantains, slices of pineapple, sausage and eggs.

"Why all the hand wringing?" Jeremy asked between bites of a kidney-sized croissant, flakes of pastry showering his lap which he brushed off his shorts absently. "I mean, isn't this what these trips are about anyway? Kind of a reset?"

My egg looked like it had been fucked, or rather, fertilized. Some overzealous rooster doing his thing—copulating. "Does that still work for you, that reset?" I asked.

"What do you mean? You were the one who encouraged me to come for that very reason."

I pushed my beans around, making a seawall against the yolk which I'd ruptured with the tine of my fork. "Jeremy, Maggie's left me." Sabotage and damage control.

Jeremy paused, fork suspended somewhere over a chasm. His yolk intact.

"Well, to be more accurate, I've moved out. At her request. No. At her insistence."

"God, I'm sorry. What happened? You two always seemed...I don't know, so good

together."

"Yeah? Thanks. I guess." I finished what was left of my sangria. "It's just until I get my shit together. You know of any good marriage counselors?" Maggie had asked to go over a year ago but I'd brushed her off. Hadn't been at the ICU ventilator stage.

"I can ask around. But no, don't know anyone off the top of my head. You could see our priest I suppose. He does that sort of thing."

"Marriage advice from a celibate? I think I'll pass."

"You don't think it's mostly just an impartial third party?"

"Thanks anyway."

"Sorry." He took a sip of his sangria. He wasn't going to finish it. "So where are you living?"

"A shitty little apartment close to the hospital."

"God, Jonah. You should have said something. You could've stayed with us. It'd be tight but we'd love to have you."

"Thanks." And I meant it, though I couldn't decide if it'd be torture or comforting staying with them. "I'm hoping it's only temporary."

"You didn't, you know, have an affair or something?"

"That's the fucked up thing. I think in some ways that might have made it easier. Some clear event, a hurdle we could've dealt with, but instead it's..."

Our waitress took Jeremy's empty plate and my glass. "You want another one?" she asked in unaccented American English.

"Here, have the rest of mine," Jeremy said, pushing his nearly untouched drink towards

me. "I'm not going to finish it."

"That'd do me in," but I didn't push it back. "You want some of my food?"

"You not hungry?"

"Wonder if I'm not coming down with something. Or maybe is just the altitude. You find your bowels get all bloated with the altitude?" Opiate induced obstipation. If I thought about it enough, I might be able to come up with its CPT code. Should rummage the stat kit or tomorrow look in the hospital, see if I could find something for it.

"Never noticed that," he said, lifting one of the sausages off my plate. "You don't find the food here tastes better, has more flavor somehow?"

"You mean the fertilized eggs?"

"The what?"

"Never mind. Something my mother always said about the eggs from our chickens."

Afterwards, we poked around in the bookstore. They had a quirky selection of books both in Spanish and English. I suspected the Condessa had been a bookstore first but found the demand for food and drink more profitable than literature. There were books on art, photography, colonial history of Central America, a history of Antigua that looked like it had been self-published. I thumbed through a book on Guatemalan birds wishing it came with a soundtrack.

Jeremy leafed through *La Remolacha*, an English language weekly bristling with ex-pat attitude, excoriating both Guatemala and the US. "Ever wonder what it would be like to pick up and move to a foreign country?"

"Like, here you mean?" I thumbed a slim book of poetry titled, *The Cinnamon Peeler*.

I've never been a poetry fan but what I was reading struck me as luminous. Maybe it was just the pleasant buzz from the sangrias. But I felt better, lighter somehow, unburdened almost, reading lines about nights spent outdoors, love gone awry, family, forgiveness.

"Poetry? Really dude?"

"Fuck you. The comic books are over there."

He laughed.

"There was a time Maggie would've come. She talked about us doing a sabbatical."

"Really? How could you not have taken her up on that? Becky's family would kill me if we moved the kids away even for a while." He raised his eyebrows at a photo of a topless theater troupe performing a local director-written play. But that was Antigua's ex-pat community, sort of a never never land in the midst of poverty, starvation and the aftermath of Guatemala's civil war.

"Bit of a gamble bringing a family here," I said. "But makes no sense to me now, why I didn't take her up on it."

He turned the page.

"And then she stopped asking. God I fucked that up, didn't I?"

"No wonder you're reading poetry."

At the counter, the same young man that had seated us swiped my credit card. His ears were either set too low on his head or the under-development of his mandible made it appear that way. Maybe if they'd filmed *The Lord of the Rings* in the Mayan jungle they'd have given him a part. I tucked the small book into my pack.

A crowd waited to be seated at the Condessa now. Outside, the sidewalk bustled with people. Jeremy squinted up at the sun. "*Casa de Fe?*"

I groaned. My plan had been to wander, avoiding the proselytizing of the *Casa de Fe* tour.

"Come on. Do you good to put in an appearance. For your soul's sake."

"My soul's sake? Since when did you care a shit about my soul?"

He laughed. "Don't worry, we'll only catch the tail end."

"Just in time for the ask. Great."

Every year the team visited *La Casa de Fe*—The House of Faith—before going to the hospital to check that our medical gear had arrived okay. As most of our patients lived a long distance from Antigua, they needed a place to stay with their families while awaiting surgery. It was a Ronald McDonald house sort of place, modern and clean, with a pleasant courtyard and a rooftop garden over its gender-separate bunk rooms. It always depressed the hell out of me. There'd be a slideshow with cute starving children, brave indigenous people facing discrimination, crushing poverty and violence. I'd feel bad, my brief sangria high, shot to hell. But maybe with the book of poetry in my pack like a secret power pack, I'd be able to withstand their entreating eyes. Not that I wasn't happy to donate, but I didn't need the deflation.

Even if I had the wherewithal to look for some faith I wasn't sure I could find it on my own. "You don't find all the streets in Antigua look similar?"

"Isn't it on the arch street, the one over there? You know with the yellow cathedral at the end?"

"Oh. I suppose. But you're not hearing the intent behind what I'm saying."

He laughed. "But I'm hearing your soul crying out."

"Stray dogs howling."

"You mean that you're a heathen piece of shit and can't stand to listen to them go on about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?"

"Jonah received word directly from God you know, didn't need the Mercy Mission folks to tell him about it."

"They have a tougher job than you give them credit for. Some of the teams can be real prigs I hear."

"You're saying we're special. How nice."

"Fuck, Jonah. What's eating you?"

"Must be the altitude."

Jeremy opened the ornate wooden door and we stepped into *La Casa de Fe's* shaded courtyard. I guessed they were all in the chapel. I poached a few cookies and what remained of the coffee.

"Locusts." Jeremy smiled.

"Us or them?"

He held a shushing finger over his lips as he made his way past the silver jewelry set out on a card table and the Mayan chocolate bars, small sacks of coffee beans dressed up in Guatemalan textiles, water bottles. They'd done a nice job with the tee shirts.

With my styrofoam cup of coffee, I sidled up in back of the chapel while Jeremy took a seat in the middle, people happily making room for him. He was in his element.

A Mercy Mission promotional video played across a screen up front with a collage of photos and inspirational music. There were even photos of our team. How strategic. I watched as

photos of nurses, patients, surgeons serious, bent over surgical fields, played across the screen to cheering and clapping. There was a photo of me holding a young Guatemalan boy on my lap with a mask clamped over his face as he went off to sleep. I wore pink scrubs and an awkward smile, I remember he'd just peed on me and I was trying to figure out what to do. Some Mercy Mission intern fashioned these slideshows for each team, making sure their photos figured prominently so that we would feel important and valued. The slides finished with a child dressed in traditional Mayan clothes and the pre-requisite large entreating eyes. *Won't you?*

Mercy Mission's in-country coordinator concluded the presentation with a prayer led by our own chaplain and after everyone raised their bowed heads, there was the introduction of Mercy Mission's Administrative Facilitators—our minders.

The elderly couple appeared thin, tan and wrinkled. With similar beaky noses and matching perfect dental implant smiles, the Robertsons might have been brother and sister. Each wore identical mint-green polo shirts and khaki zip-off traveler's pants. Their Chacos sandals hinted at a vigor that belied their 70-odd years. They spoke Spanish which was an improvement over others in the past, but didn't have any medical background, he having retired from insurance and she from a lifetime of running their Texas ranch.

"Bienvenidos a los todos a Antigua, Guatemala!" they welcomed us in unison, knowing full well that most of the team didn't speak Spanish. We were being put on notice that this was their territory and they had no plans to sit quietly and let our team do its own thing. Standing there they reminded me of nothing so much as grinning, self-satisfied crocodiles.

From the outside, the hospital looked like a large wedding cake plunked down on the

street corner. Christ's wedding cake. The ornate facade towered above and was painted a creamy yellow, accented in white, replete with niched saints and holy personages of unclear identity. Its corner plaza bustled with a mix of patients, tourists and street vendors selling jewelry, pineapple slices, fruit juice and tortillas.

A young Mayan woman dressed to the teeth, arms draped with jade necklaces and silver bracelets accosted Jeremy and me, "I Clara. I remember you. You buy from me." She held up a little doll. "For your daughter."

"You think she really remembers us?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? Hi Clara, I find you later, okay? After all the stuff I bought for my kids from her last time?"

She smiled. "For your daughters. I find you later," she said before approaching others in our group.

There were two entrances to *Las Obras*, one grand with an arched double-door which led to its chapel—a church really—and another smaller, humbler entrance which led to the hospital itself. While the hospital took up an entire city block, its main entrance looked like nothing more than a porter's door. It was so small that I had to duck to avoid hitting my gringo head. They might have inscribed over the doors: Best to be admitted to church and heaven, failing that, enter the hospital for care of your corrupt and fallible body.

Inside, the hospital hummed with activity, even on a weekend. Our whole team, more than thirty of us now, walked past a long line of Guatemalans standing in line waiting. Clinics ran everyday even during the weekend and we would spend tomorrow even though it was Sunday, triaging for the coming week of surgery.

Despite the hospital's antiquated feel, it was clean and well-maintained. Everything had a fresh coat of paint. The floors were swept and mopped. Someone up front led us down a long black and white tiled corridor lit from above by windows high up near the roof. More patients sat along one wall watching a tiny television set suspended overhead. On the long corridor's corner there stood a coin operated scales, a fortune telling machine, and above these a row of plexiglass boxes. More than a dozen of these held dioramas of *las obras*—the works and miracles of San Pedro for whom the hospital was named—*Las Obras Sociales del Santo Hermano Pedro*, or *Las Obras* for short. In each box, the dark-haired bearded Pedro performed some miracle. In all of them, grim faced, he labored with an expression of exquisite suffering. Hand carved and painted in somber colors, the figures might have been traversing different levels of Hell for all the pain and suffering in evidence. The *milagros* themselves defied easy interpretation. He might have been a vet, for even the donkeys, birds and other animals appeared to be in pain. Whether he fell or flew wasn't clear. There should have been one with him seated, interminably waiting.

The hospital felt like a maze, medical dungeons and dragons. I shuffled along in back, down more dark corridors, past storerooms of blankets, an enormous steaming kitchen filled with impeccably dressed employees clanking and rattling food trays. We came out of the gloom briefly through a series of interior courtyards with orange trees and roses, and in one, two elderly women sat on a bench sleeping in the late-morning sun.

It didn't matter how many times I'd been here, there still came a point at which I felt lost, but at last arrived at the operating rooms. We filed in through the door with its automatic fan that roared at us, pushing air each time we opened it as though entering a mouth.

I settled into a chair in the large white room which doubled as meeting area and cafeteria.

On one wall someone had painted a large mural of Doubting Thomas sticking his ungloved fingers into Christ's wounds. Next to that hung a painting of an OR with Christ—unscrubbed, without a face mask, wearing His dusty robes—standing behind a surgeon bent sweating over a patient's open abdomen. He rested his hand on the surgeon's shoulder.

Next to me, Cruz said, "Would have been more useful if someone had given him a retractor and asked to help with exposure. Never mind their assurance that God is with us, confidence's never been our problem—just give me more light and better exposure. That, and sharp blades and scissors that cut." I laughed. A few people grabbed cokes from the fridge, cracked and drank them as we waited.

Father José didn't apologize for his lateness but welcomed us in Spanish, pausing to allow our interpreter to translate. "Thank you for the work of God you are doing on the Guatemalans' behalf." He wore the simple brown hooded robes of the Franciscan Order, the roped belt and sandals, without self-consciousness or irony. His manners were impeccable, if a little reserved. His deep-set piercing blue eyes held not a shred of humility. He was rumored to speak English fluently, and his choice not to speak English to us, people suggested, was pride, to avoid stumbling over our language, but I doubted that. He was asking us to respect their ways, their language, their culture. His body language, even in the absurd Middle Ages garb, said as much.

Father José ran the hospital which did more surgeries than any hospital in Guatemala with the exception of the National Hospital in Guatemala City. *Las Obras* also ran many clinics, healthcare initiatives, cared for and housed a bewildering number of babies, children and adults with disabilities, and cared for a number of elderly patients suffering from advanced dementia.

This city block, while large and a world unto itself, was bursting at its crumbling cement seams. They needed more room. I guessed they employed more people in Antigua than anyone else, with the possible exception of the government, or maybe the luxurious *Casa Santo Domingo* hotel. Father José briefly touched on a funding campaign for a new building to house more disabled people. He didn't belabor the point but our donations would be welcome. He blessed us and then left us with Luz Elena who was to give us a brief tour of the hospital and its wards.

Down more dark passages, up stairs and around covered walkways, we peered into long dormitories like I remembered from Madeline books I read to my kids. There were rows of shoes next to beds, toothbrushes tucked in fabric pockets embroidered with their owners' names.

There were whole wings filled with children and young adults seated in wheelchairs and strapped into adaptive equipment, a garden of the disfigured and delayed in which patients squirmed like colorful grubs on squares of carpet tucked amongst the bushes and potted plants in the dappled sunlight. Everywhere there were attendants and caregivers dressed in blue and white striped uniforms spooning in slurps of food or wiping chins. *Buenas*, was said in greeting, heads bobbing as we passed by.

In another wing were housed babies. Babies in cribs. Babies in beds. Babies in metal cages. Babies in the arms of more nurses and volunteers. Arrayed as they were in no apparent order, it reminded me of a garage or warehouse sale. A cleft palate next to a failure to thrive next to a syndromic inborn error of metabolism next to a shaken baby next to a Downs next to a meningocele next to a hydrocephalic next to a... I caught myself.

This insistence, this compulsion to catalog, to name and identify wouldn't shut off. Here were people. Here were sons and daughters. Here were disappointments and tragedy, and I must

name the flavor, must slap my medical labels on the texture of that sorrow. As they were saying last night, it was one of the damning hazards of our profession, to hold everything at a remove with our differential diagnoses, our laundry list of suffering. A defense mechanism learned too well.

Amie stood looking down at a baby with a cleft palate. Even at this early age I could sense his puzzlement and a vague anxiety as he followed her with his eyes. I did my best to avoid looking at the curlicues of tissue, the gaps and tissue bridge failures. He had the face of a gargoyle. "He's here like veal, to be fattened up before slaughter." I said.

"You mean surgery," she said without looking up.

"That's what I said." I reminded her—myself really—that, while shocking, in some ways these were the most normal of the babies. If you could blot out the mid-face disfigurement. Amie didn't say anything, just turned to the next crib. See, even here I had to explain and expound. I followed her. Inside it was an infant whose pinched wan face looked misplaced on his tiny body.

"It says he's almost three." Amie indicated a baby-blue index card taped to the crib. Diego. His birthday was in April, less than a month away. She tickled his feet through the metal slats, and he broke into a smile and giggles swooped in from nowhere I could imagine.

"Like so many cukes and rutabagas," someone from our group said to his daughter.

"Dad, they're not!"

He laughed good-naturedly, content with an American smugness.

Amie continued to tickle the little boy's feet. I couldn't call him a baby, that seemed unkind, a betrayal of that sad face before she'd intruded with her own happiness. Like she'd tricked him in some way, despite himself, making him laugh and snort in an untidy way. I took

over tickling his feet as she moved on to Diego's neighbor.

I feared the return of that forlorn face. I cooed. Made a silly face. But it was no use. I could feel that face circling in the air, waiting for a moment of inattention.

After the hospital, we crossed the street to Frieda's for lunch. Rice, beans and a couple empanadas. I had a margarita, and then another one, chasing the feeling from earlier in the morning that *La Casa de Fe* and Diego had punctured.

In the street afterwards, the heat and margaritas conspired in my uncovered head, making me wooden and slow-witted. My comrades talked of shopping for their kids and family back home.

I should have followed those headed back to the hotel via the jade shops, but thought maybe I'd buy a Day of the Dead figure or a soccer jersey for my son, silver earrings for my daughter. I'd have bought Maggie something if I'd have thought it'd do any good, but she'd just scoff, give it to charity.

Amie, Jeremy and a couple others crossed the street towards an iron-gated doorway set into an old rock wall.

"Look at that," Amie said, pointing through the gate into a large open courtyard. Painted wooden statues stood fixed to long procession floats and would be carried on people's shoulders through the streets on the days and weeks leading up to Easter. These life-sized religious statues and figures looked gruesome and ornate at the same time. Christ dressed in thick purple brocade dragged a rough wooden cross across a desert on one platform. He was too hot. I could feel the sweat pouring off him. Following behind Him were two women figures in mourning. On the

back of another platform stood a dead tree and a dangling noose snugged around someone's neck. It might have been Christ as well, I couldn't tell, but then my knowledge of biblical events didn't travel far. Their faces wore identical masks of misery and transcendence as well as copious amounts of blood. Something in Central America about the convergence of Catholicism with the Maya had produced this tradition of sanctity and gore. Whether the original Spanish priests had encouraged it or the indigenous people had their own tradition or the two amplified each other wasn't clear to me but there was enough blood running down heads, chests and arms, that Christ might have been a walk-on for a horror film set. A shimmering over it all added to my soporific feeling. I swayed along behind Jeremy and Amie in the heat.

We left Christ to struggle along with his cross and garlands, perched on his gold layer cake. He looked like he might follow along later, with his burden, I thought.

We walked in the general direction of the mercado, making our way down the cobbled streets, past a mix of restaurants, grocers, artisan shops and language schools. The streets became more crowded forcing us to step off the tall sidewalks to let people by, dodging cars and motorbikes as we did. Our roundabout path took us along the north edge of town. Along the far side of the street a dusty row of pines shielded a towering yellow cathedral. We crossed over to read the plaque out front.

"*La Iglesia de la Merced* built in 1767," read Jeremy. We looked up at its twin bell towers and Our Lady of Mercedes in the central niche of honor. She was flanked by founders and martyrs of the Merced Order.

"The color reminds me of cardiac fat," I said. It was that rich burnt cream color of fat covering the heart, like the body found a special place for those rich desserts.

"God, that's gross," said Amie.

But Jeremy nodded in agreement.

As people moved on, Amie dropped back and tugged on my sleeve. "I want to light some candles."

"For who?" I asked.

"For my kids. For our team. I don't know. For no one. I just want to light candles."

The thought of the church's cool interior appealed to me. The others shrugged but no one else was interested and so trailed off in the direction of the mercado without us.

Inside, I stood with my back against the intricately carved wooden doors and let my eyes adjust from the early afternoon light outside. Inside was dark and cool. My dizziness subsided somewhat. A stone-flagged aisle led down between dark wooden pews. Off to the left sat a stone basin of water and in the corner, candles flickered in a draft. I followed Amie towards the candles. She trailed her fingers in the basin's water.

"Don't you have to cross yourself or something?" I asked.

"I'll light a candle."

I dipped my fingers in the water. It was so cool. With cupped hands I brought water to my face meaning to cool my face but it felt so delicious that I drank a few swallows.

"What are you *doing*?" Amie laughed, pulling me towards the candles whose flames guttered in surprise.

The stack of unlit candles sat like cordwood, tallow fingers packed neatly alongside the tin collection box. I dropped two quetzales inside. When the coins' rattle echoed off the walls and cathedral's high ceiling, an elderly woman seated in the pews looked round.

I took a candle and passed another to Amie. The lit candles stood in bleacher rows in all stages of dissolution, their little flame hearts fluttering down into puddles of wax. And as we each lit ours from those already burning, one just a faint tip of blue in its molten pool, it took on a solemnity and significance. I couldn't say for what but something resonated deep inside.

A prayer seemed in order. For the team, our patients, for my kids, even for my wife back home. I'd not made things easy for her. Calamity always dogged these trips for her. Car break-ins, flooded basements, fist-fights in school, dishwasher break-downs. It didn't matter, I supposed, now we were separated, but I prayed to the god of household calamities, on her behalf. Lit a candle for uneventfulness and deliverance. Intercession. Maybe I'd make a procession of it, burdened with bloody toaster ovens, cracked popcorn popper, the little cubes of broken glass like ice, and my own effigy in flames on the top of it all. I became aware of Amie staring at me.

"Here, you need another," and she handed me a second candle. I took her hand and we tipped the candle's wick with flame. I said another prayer in the disquiet of my head and set the candle in the cooling pool of wax.

"A romantic," said Amie. "Who knew? We'll make you a Catholic yet."

We wandered up the side aisle, past wood-framed glass boxes which housed more saints and the Mother Mary. These poorly-lit tableaux could have been after-hours aquariums, water drained, everything slick and shiny, the suffocating layers of varnish and shellac tinging the saints' skin blue in the dim light. I breathed deep, feeling the thinness of the air, the scant oxygen. Amie gave me a strange look before nudging me towards the front of the cathedral.

"Marry me," I said under my breath.

She took my hand with her cool fingers and swung it in an arc, as priests do with their

censers. "And *what* would my husband think?" but she smiled as she said it, before letting my hand go at the height of the arc, like jumping off a swing set.

High overhead up in the dimness, hung long lengths of purple cloth commemorating the resurrection. At the very front, beneath stained glass windows stood the cross-carrying effigy of Jesús Nazareno of la Merced carved in 1650. His crown bristled with metal thorns which could have been spinal needles. His face, chiseled and gaunt, bordered on emaciation but his dark eyes held mine as if he might turn me to stone.

"Do you feel that?" whispered Amie. "It's like there's a draft of cold air coming off him."

An icy sunburst pattern in silver and gold radiated from behind his head like solar flares breaking free from the surface of the sun. I shivered. "Only a wooden dummy, right?"

Amie elbowed me. "Shh."

Arrayed before Him lay brightly colored *alfombras*. Pell mell designs on the floor, like brilliant rugs with geometric borders and quetzal bird patterns painted in blossoms, flower petals, pine needles and brightly colored saw dust. Around them stood pineapples, papayas, mangoes and long canoe-shaped seed pods. Might be fertility offerings for an elaborate marriage bed, for Christ, the bride of the church. The Guatemalans would make more *alfombras* out in the street for the processions to walk over. Afterwards, the streets resembled marriage beds the morning after, wrecked and destroyed, all the color and joy pushed into cobblestone cracks and scattered horseshit skid marks.

"Where's the confessional?" I asked.

The elderly woman looked up again.

"Come on," Amie pulled me away from the booth. "Confess to me outside."

We sat on a stone bench in the church's courtyard near a large iron cross, squinting even in the shade of the pines. The heat now felt good. "I'm sorry," I said. "That second margarita was a mistake."

"That's your confession?" Amie laughed. "And here I thought I might finally get some dirt on the perfect Dr. Jonah Brockton." She slugged my shoulder with her banged fist. "Confess something real to me."

I looked out over the tops of buildings past cathedral domes to the volcanoes Fuego and Acatenango. Fuego, still active, its sides raw and stripped of vegetation. "I don't know what's real anymore."

She waited for more, but I shook my head.

A pigeon landed on the iron cross and pecked at a thatch of grass growing out of the crook.

"Been swallowed by a whale?"

At least it'd be warm and dark. And maybe it'd turn me into ambergris. "I'd tell you that my wife kicked me out of the house but that might sound like a come on."

"She did? For real? God, I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Everyone's sorry."

"Well, maybe you're not. Maybe it's a good thing?"

A good thing. I tried to imagine what a good thing might be. "No. It's a fucking disaster."

Amie watched the pigeon as it shuffled the length of the cross before fluttering down to the ground. "Why is marriage so hard?"

"It's just temporary. Until I get my shit together." The pigeon skirted around us, pecking

in the dirt. "Not that she said temporary. But it was understood."

She took my hand like a sister might, examining my cuticles. "All we ever talk about is the kids anymore. Do you experience that? It's like we're just placeholders to each other."

I nodded. Whatever crazy spark that had been present earlier had gone out.

"You know the crazy thing?" she said. "I never wanted kids. I was going to sail around the world. Can you believe that?"

"What? Alone?"

She dropped my hand. "You prick. Why not alone?"

I held up my hands in apology.

"You're like everyone else."

"What happened?"

"My husband—boyfriend at the time—turned out wasn't serious about sailing with me. Then I got pregnant." She shrugged. "End of story."

"I'd have gone with you."

She laughed. "Now there's a half-baked come on. You know what a Jonah is right?"

"I guessed I deserved that." A black stray dog padded by flushing the pigeon up onto the church roof.

"You think there are really bodies beneath the church floor?" asked Amie.

"What, you think we were walking over bones and skeletons back there?"

"Didn't you see the names engraved on the flagstones?"

"No. I was distracted by a beautiful nurse." I took her hand and pulled her up. "Come on, maybe we can find the others."

"That doesn't sound like getting your shit together."

"It's not what you think," I said. "I didn't cheat on her."

"So what's this about?" She held our intertwined hands out for inspection.

"I'm sorry. You're right." But she didn't let go when I loosened my grip. We crossed the street and walked in the direction of the mercado hand in hand. The street framed one of the volcanoes off in the distance like a postcard.

"I wish my kids could see this," she said letting a cluster of school girls in uniform go by.

"Will you bring them one day?"

"My son maybe. My husband's so hard on him. Always pushing, If you're going to be a doctor you can't do this, can't do that. I don't think he realizes how much my son takes all that stuff to heart. Makes him anxious. I tell my husband to lay off but then it's me, Why didn't I become a doctor? You know? My son could be a nurse, there are lots of male nurses, it's a great profession. Why not?" We stepped off the curb together to let go by another clot of people. "Who would you bring?"

"My daughter might come. She's a little squeamish but could help interpret or do kitchen stuff if she didn't want to see any medical stuff."

She smiled. "What's she like?"

"Gawky. A theater nerd. No interest in medicine at all. But she's busy. Were you this busy when you were in high school? I mean my daughter has so much going on and that doesn't even count school and homework. I worry it's too much."

"Do you think we're too ambitious for our kids? Is that it? Do we put too much on their shoulders? Our own anxieties? My husband does, but I get that, even allow it in some part. Who

doesn't want their kids to succeed? My husband sees me working around all you doctors, going on these trips and I think he's, not jealous exactly, but intimidated on my behalf and doesn't want his kids to experience that. I tell him he's missing the point."

"What does he do?"

"He's got a great job! That's the crazy thing. I don't understand. Makes good money but it's his dad's business and I don't think he's really gotten out from under that. He's too sensitive about it. My son, like I said, internalizes it." We stopped to look at a street vendor's rack of soccer jerseys. "The only time I don't see it is out on the soccer field. My god, you should see him! That kid would tear your heart out for a goal. But meet him on the street? Wouldn't say boo. Funny that." She bought a Guatemalan national team jersey for him. "He'll think this is funny." She pointed to one of the team's sponsors, Bimbo, which made snacks. "He's always so protective towards me. It's sweet, but I worry about him."

From the mercado, we rode a tuk-tuk back to the hotel, though we weren't supposed to, due to safety concerns. Amie asked the driver how old he was. "*Quince años*," the boy said flashing a proud smile. "Do you mind if we take your photo?" She pantomimed with her phone. He nodded. "Fifteen, the same age as my son." She handed me her phone and they stood together in front of the motorcycle rickshaw both of them smiling as though one of them had just told a joke.

On the ride back, the unmuffled engine roared and the whole contraption shook as the boy drove us over the cobbles. Amie and I sat scrunched together in back, our shoulders and thighs touching as we swayed around corners. Every so often the boy would turn to check on us,

smiling as if sharing a secret. Amie beamed, radiant and happy, her blue-green eyes flashing.

He dropped us off outside the hotel gate. After we'd paid him and given him a tip larger than his fare, he gave us a shy little wave and motored off down the street. I had an uncontrollable urge to kiss Amie, to wrap my arms around her as she stood there watching him go, but the gate opened and a few team members stepped out.

Around the pool in the late afternoon, the team had gathered for the daily team meeting. I arrived late, having woken to the slippery edge of a dream. It receded even as I tried to pull it back. Something about a group anointing with narcotics. Putting people to sleep, one by one by one. I eyed the chips and guacamole but I didn't see how I could get some without drawing attention to myself. A small group of nurses had a bottle of wine and were already a little red-faced, whether from the alcohol or the sun I couldn't say. I ducked back to the bar for a drink and their laughter carried across the garden with its flowering shrubs, low brick walls and fountains. Off in the distance, Fuego puffed a few clouds of ash.

Scott raised his voice to be heard over the boisterous conversations so that even at the bar I could hear.

"Just a few things to go over before dinner. This year, as some of you know, we've introduced a mentor program. We've paired every newbie with a veteran. That way they can be instructed."

"Corrupted!" someone shouted.

Scott laughed before continuing, "*Instructed*, as to proper protocol and so we can answer any general questions they may have. If you don't know who your mentor, or mentee—is that

even a word?"

"Manatee!" General shouting of, Manatee! and Manatees! drowned Scott out for a moment.

Laughed, "Yes, if you don't know who your manatee is, check with Bella or the list. Tomorrow is triage day, so we'll meet for breakfast at six, devotions at six-thirty and we'll head over to the *Las Obras* at seven. Patients will already be there waiting, so surgeons will start seeing patients upstairs immediately and the nurses know who they are that will be helping them. The rest of you all will start unloading our trunks in the OR. Bella's in charge of upstairs triage and Amie is in charge of unpacking downstairs. Anesthesiologists, you'll be helping with unpacking your stuff downstairs in the morning and then as we begin to get patients seen we'll need you upstairs to begin screening patients scheduled for surgery. So Jonah will be the point person for anesthesia. Jonah, are you here?"

"Yup!" I hurried back across the lawn, careful not to spill my drink. "Just getting a refill." The unnecessary lie bubbled up for no good reason.

"Right. If you've got questions, see Bella upstairs, Amie downstairs or Jonah. Anything else I've missed?" he asked, turning to Bella.

"Wear your shirts to triage tomorrow. And interpreters, do you want to say anything about interpreters?"

"Ah, yes, thank you!" He went on to explain that there would be community volunteers coming to help with translation as well as the team's own interpreters. "And if we've missed anyone who speaks Spanish, please come find one of us and we can get you plugged in. Now John is going to perform the anointing of hands and then will give a *brief* blessing before we eat.

Brief, that's what you promised, right John?"

John set his drink down and stood. John, the team's chaplain, heavy-set, balding and in his early-seventies had been coming on the team's trips for years.

"Yes, I'll be brief. I hope you've all had an enjoyable day. I spent mine sleeping beneath a book while my wife was out shopping for the grandchildren. She bought this." He indicated the brightly woven length of textile around his neck. "I think she intends to use it as a table runner, but in the meantime I've appropriated it, as I left my stole at home."

I laughed and settled on to the edge of a low brick wall. Amie caught my eye where she sat with some of her nurses and smiled.

John fiddled with a portable stereo and turned on some instrumental music, something more appropriate to yoga than church.

"I know not all of you here believe in God but I want you to play along if you will. I want you to think about the reasons you are here. What brings you. I want you to see this ceremony as a way to set yourself apart in that spirit of helping. While you may not believe, you'll find that most of your patients do. Even now, they and their families are praying that God will guide your hands and help with their healing. So I want this anointing of your hands to be a symbol, a public declaration that you are here to help these people. That you are sharing your training, your expertise, your wisdom. Isn't that a form of blessing? Sharing your gifts with those less fortunate than yourselves? So think about that intention, that desire to do good and let that guide you this week. That better self you are here."

"You've left behind those day-to-day commitments, your families and made it a priority to come here. You've spent money, worried about it and I'm here to say, Thank you. Thank you

on behalf of all of those that you will help this week. I know there may be struggles and difficulties but do what you do best. Leave the rest up to that spirit of generosity and kindness that has guided you here today. And if there's room for mystery, what many of us call God, be open to it. Welcome in that wonder and mystery as you work this week. So please stand with me now."

There was a general shuffling as people stood. Some bowed their heads with eyes closed, others stood, looking vaguely uncomfortable. Should they hold their drinks or set them down? They looked around for a hint. Most set them down but a few held them between clasped hands. I was in the hand clasped drink category.

John said a brief prayer, for hands, for healing, but without invoking any particular god.

John opened his eyes. "Now in addition to forgetting my regular vestments, I failed to seal the anointing oil properly and it spilled out during the flight here. So with Rosa's help from the kitchen, I've secured some cooking oil and will be blessing your hands with corn oil I think it is. My Spanish isn't so good, but I think she understood me. If any of you develop a rash or something from this, please seek Dr. Brockton's advice."

This laughter was a release of sorts. John read his audience so much better than the first pastor I remembered from earlier trips.

"I'll also have small wooden crosses that can be worn around your neck if you like. They're made here in Guatemala by patients." He turned the music's volume up and those who had done this before had already begun forming a line and he began the anointing.

I hung back, joining the line near the end. When it came to my turn, I held out my hands. John blessed me by name and took my hands in his with a firmer grip than I expected and with

his finger dipped in oil, drew a cross on the palm of each hand and then placed a tiny wooden cross threaded with black nylon over my head.

I returned to my seat holding my hands at my side, aware of their slick oiliness, and imagined their new found power.

After dinner, we sat talking, buying each other drinks for old imagined debts. Julie, one of the OB/Gyn's, had invited along a surgical tech from the hospital, enticed her with the promise that she'd pay her bar bill for the week.

"That may have been a serious mis-calculation," Jules said watching Lyssa as she doled out drinks to the other techs.

As darkness fell and the team thinned around the bar, we moved to the covered shelter and built a fire.

"Whatever happened to that neurosurgeon that got arrested?" someone asked.

"Which one? The one arrested for abusing his step-daughter?"

"No, the other one. The good-looking one who one day just disappeared."

"Not the one on drugs?"

"I know, right? What's been with the neurosurgeons perp parade lately? You think you know someone and then it turns out there's a whole other life they've been living and you had no idea. Of course they're all a pack of weirdos."

"That's a little unfair."

"Just a little."

Amie looked my way, saluting me with her drink.

"His name showed up on the board's quarterly rap sheet. Had been exchanging painkillers for sexual favors."

"What?!"

"I know."

"Though I suppose that's better than putting a screw through someone's spinal cord. But less forgivable apparently."

"You hear that?" asked Jeremy.

The faint sounds of a brass band came to us from the far side of the hotel grounds.

"What do you say?"

"Now? It's past eleven."

"We always used to. Have things really changed that much? It's not like we'd be going alone." Several years ago Mercy Missions had imposed a strict curfew for teams. To keep us safe.

"Who's around?" The dining room tables around the bar had emptied out.

"Five minutes, at the gate."

We nodded and whispered, *Buenas noches* to the guard with his holstered pistol and impassive face beneath a cowboy hat. He opened the door and then locked it behind us. Out on the street a few people walked along the sidewalk under a single streetlight. As a group, we headed away from the light and the center of town in a direction I'd not walked before. The sidewalk crossed a small stream that glistened darkly. As we made our way beneath the trees that lined the sidewalk I began to hear the brass band again. The sound of a snare and boom of a

drum came faintly through the trees. The wobbling brass instruments sounded like they were circling a drain, sometimes dipping down low, and other times running higher up the wall, fast and loud. And now there began a steady stream of Guatemalans headed in our same direction. There walked families with small children, teenaged couples holding hands. A few people walked in the opposite direction dressed in purple gowns, having done their turn supporting the floats, *las andas* as Cruz called them.

Our little group turned onto a larger street and found the procession had just passed. Casting a glow with its own lights, the procession lurched down the dark street accompanied by its brass band, the music echoing off walls and buildings lining the street, jangling and bouncing back in a drunken way before at last the band's playing came to a ragged stop. We joined the crowd of people swarming alongside the procession, and in the sudden quiet of the band's pause, the crowd's murmuring and footsteps mixed with the whirring of the generators carried behind in wheelbarrows.

The others disappeared into the crowd but I felt them out there in the dark with me, murmuring. As a crowd we moved together over the cobbles, streaming around trees and other obstacles like a dark flood. Someone lurched into me avoiding a metal post that reared up unseen. I reached out a hand to steady them, keep them from falling. The person clasped my hand with surprising strength, an elderly gentleman dressed in a black suit and sober hat. He gave me a brief nod before disappearing back into the crowd like a fish. A drum roll was followed by a cymbal crash and the trumpets and tubas wheezed to life again. Whether the dirge took its lead from the procession's lurching progress or the music dictated the staggering course wasn't clear but it caught me up in its clankery logic. Two steps forward, one step back, took a

step to the side, lurched forward again, like an intricate dance step. I sluiced along with the people jostling in the street while above me careened saints, martyrs, Jesus and Mary, their expressions dire and at the same time serene and other-worldly. Some Mayan aspect of the whole thing ran beneath it, lending it all a mystic, sinister air. The processions were like weekly Mayan Mardi Gras, accelerating downhill towards Easter, getting larger and more elaborate the closer to *La Pascua* they got.

The procession took an abrupt right turn down another street and as it bent off in this new direction I could see more floats up ahead. Mary stood on one platform dressed in her blood red robes. She dazzled with light while the women carrying her were strangely hidden beneath, dressed in black so that Mary's light passed overhead uninterrupted but for a momentary upturned face or flash of eyes. The float moved in a ghostly fashion, like a raft at sea, sucked and pulled by an unseen swell. Without anchor points or landmarks I swayed and fell into its rhythm, all of us jostling and bumping into each other for guidance. Maybe was a communication of sorts like blood cells tumbling along through a vast conduit, our little receptors reaching out for reassurance. A hand from the crowd snaked out and took mine, its grasp warm and sure. I moved forward, steadied, linked to the fabric of the moment. This raven-haired woman whose hand I held nosed her way forward, like a dark fish finning upstream. We made our way past the staggering band and up between floats where priests swung censers, whose acrid smoke eddied around us like mist, its odor pungent and ethereal. More floats, like ships looming high overhead, their lights like lighthouses, and we ran streaming, against them in waves, the purple garbed pallbearers like spangled forests of kelp tangling, we squeezed through sudden gaps, then were compressed awkwardly bumping and rubbing shoulders in the dark

before surging forward again, and at last we breasted free of the crowd and found ourselves delivered onto the street in a moment of calm before an approaching wave.

We both stood taking great breaths of fresh air while the light from the radiant white Jesus mounted like a figurehead on the approaching platform bathed us in His glow. Amie stood with her black hair streaming out behind her, her cheeks flushed, her eyes reflecting the fiery Christ light. She might have been Joan of Arc caught in torch light or a bonfire. Beside her, I felt exultant, I felt diminished. I wanted to protect her and run from her even as she remained rooted to the spot. A wave of vertigo threatened to overwhelm me.

She smiled. "What?" And the moment passed. She was just Amie.

The crowd washed towards us. I tugged her hand, pulling her out of the way.

She laughed, "Where are we going?"

"I want to see it again only to let it go by this time."

She turned and looked at me, amusement in her eyes.

I found a doorway and there, with my back against the door, pulled her towards me. She hesitated before the crowd of approaching people. Hadn't she been the one to pull me along first? But she joined me with a look that might have been a shrug.

I nonetheless nestled into the crook between her bare neck and shirt collar, inhaling her. Her lips brushed the top of my head like a big sister might but I felt her breasts as she lifted and settled them against my chest. One of her thighs brushed between mine for a moment before a cymbal crash and blare of trumpets, and she turned back around to watch as the sea of people enveloped us.

There were food vendors, again the crash of cymbals and a momentary pause before the

band got on with the messy business of resurrection, its warbling and blaring alternating with a settled series of oompahs and drum rolls as though Christ and Mary stood wavering on the lip of a high dive.

With the flood of people Amie settled back against me. I put my arms around her, my back not squawking for a change, my hands low at the brim of her pelvis and she placed hers over mine whether to prevent their wandering or to ensure their staying I couldn't say. We stood rooted as the procession swirled past. There were stations of the cross, martyrs and saints, several figures of Christ and Mary, there again were the elderly women wearing black dresses and patent leather shoes, pressed down beneath their ponderous burden, brows furrowed, breathing heavily, doing their little two-step shuffle. I held onto Amie as the swirling and swaying threatened to suck us from our doorway into the current, everything eddying by with its profusion of blood, gilt and dusty brocade. In an illuminated gap there swung a noose on one altar, on another a full sized donkey with a cringing saint who might have been hermano Pedro.

I inhaled it all through the veil of Amie's hair, the smell of her sweat in my nose, her otherness. Felt the warmth of her hips and back up against me, the small movements as she shifted her weight emphasizing the suck and draw of the floats' tidal passage, wriggling her ass sometimes, turning to follow the passing of the band, and when a passing street vendor hefted a rack of stuffed animals towards us his eyebrows raised in question and we shook our heads in unison it set off a little earthquake of sensation. The world swam crazily by and we swayed in sympathy, resonating to the lurching passage of the wooden saints perched on thrones, the writhing cobbles, the ebbing and flowing. At one point there might have surfaced Jeremy, Cruz and the others but I couldn't swear to it.

And as the last float swayed by and the attendant wheelbarrows of generators shuffled along behind, Amie sighed. When I tried to kiss the space behind her ear, she spun away, leaving me behind.

She stood in the street, her head cocked, listening to something as a few people hurried by in the dark. As my eyes quieted, the stars began to venture out but all I could hear was the barking of dogs.

Chapter Three

I woke to a choking sensation, like someone held a hand over my mouth and nose, until at last, with a huge gasp and a fit of coughing, I sat up. My roommate's bed was empty. Gooseflesh stood proud on my arms and chest. I tried smoothing it down but as I did my stomach started to churn. The tiny wooden cross which John yesterday had placed around my neck swung side to side over my bare chest. I pushed it like a doorbell, indenting skin on chest with its image.

"What time you'd get in last night?" A freshly showered Mark asked, entering the room wearing only a towel.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"It's okay, I was just concerned. You know, with all the security issues."

"We were just up late talking. One of the only nights we don't have surgery the next day."

"Ah, I see." He sat on the edge of the bed. "Is that typical that people go out after dark like that?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I saw a group of you leave through the entrance last night."

"Ah, that." My face flushed. "I'd never seen a night procession before. We heard it come by the hotel."

"I'd have liked to have seen it." He smiled and began dressing.

I picked up my clothes from last night. They smelled of burnt resin—the priests' incense—all trace of Amie gone.

He stood up. "I'll see you at breakfast then."

I got to my feet, swaying still, imagining Amie. Two steps forward, one step back, a lurch to the side. A Guatemalan two step.

The cooks had been out provisioning, so for breakfast there was bacon, mangoes, pineapple, watermelon, granola, yogurt, eggs, Guatemalan coffee. While I salvaged myself a plate from the leftovers, the rest of the team waited in the thatched shelter for John to start the devotional. I couldn't see Amie and with a flutter imagined her back in her room asleep.

With a cup of coffee and a single slice of bacon, I stood off to the side. Amie was sitting up front next to the Robertsons who wore matching pink Mercy Mission polo shirts and obsequious expressions of piety. It was altogether too early for that. I tried to catch Amie's eye but she kept her attention on the devotional. That little glow I'd felt cooled.

John went mercifully short, brevity one of his chief attributes. John worried constantly about his relevance to the team and took great pains not to rub our faces in his brand of religiosity. We sang a Leonard Cohen song and he spoke on crises of faith, how we all suffered them, Christians or not. The Robertsons' expressions soured as he talked of his own struggles with belief. I could have laughed. John corralled more donations than any single person in all the

Mercy Mission's teams and this gave him a bit of recklessness. The Robertsons of the world feared that. For all John's bumbling and hand-wringing, they couldn't help but recognize his humility, his courage and his warmth. He then had the balls to finish with Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" which, despite the Robertsons' scandalized expressions, struck that perfect tone of sadness and hope. As people drifted back to their rooms the Robertsons couldn't help see people drying their eyes.

I'd determined to let Amie be, but on the walk to the hospital she dropped back to where I trailed behind the main group. "Hey," she said.

"Some devotional, huh?"

She smiled. "It was the oddest thing. I kept hearing that band playing in my sleep. I would wake thinking the floats were coming by the hotel again."

"Was a catchy tune."

"Listen, I'm sorry." Her pace slowed as she looked at her feet. Wedged between cobblestones was evidence of the prior night's procession: pine needles, bruised bougainvillea blossoms and a mulch of colored sawdust. "I get claustrophobic sometimes. It was strange finding you in the crowd like that. I didn't mean anything by it."

"It's okay." I scuffed a coin embedded in the sidewalk with my shoe, a death spiral of peevishness kicking in.

"Jonah, I'm flattered. Really I am. Only, the answer to all that last night has to be, no."

"I didn't know I'd asked a question. But sure. I get it." I didn't. I didn't want to. I wanted to be back in the swirl of it, holding her. "Just been lonely I guess."

"Lonely?" Her green eyes laughing. "You felt more than lonely."

I couldn't keep from smiling, though I felt ashamed now at the memory of me hard, pressing up against her ass. But she'd wriggled too, I hadn't imagined that.

"Just, it's an especially bad time," she went on. "Not that there's ever a good time, but it'd just widen cracks between us—my husband and I."

"So there are cracks."

"Don't." She glanced up at the rest of the team. "It was nice. Could be nice, only, I've got so much more to lose than you." My face must have given me away, for she added, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

"I heard, It was nice."

"No. Yes." She sighed. "That's not the point. Can't you see this for what it is? You've got everything, even if at the moment you don't have Maggie."

"And the kids."

"Don't be peevish, it doesn't suit you."

I laughed. "See what you're missing? You'd get to learn all my fatal flaws."

"I don't know what's been going on between you and Maggie. It sounds broken. I don't want that. I want us to get better."

For a moment I thought she meant *us*.

At the hospital, with help from the Guatemalan staff, we unpacked, while upstairs the surgeons began triaging patients. We stacked sterile supplies on shelves: gloves, gowns, Raytecs, lap pads, syringes, needles, surgical instruments, plastic scope sleeves, purse-string gallbladder

bags, packets of hernia repair mesh, the terrifying meat hooks used for bladder suspensions. There were IV supplies, breathing tubes, spinal kits, sutures, dressings, anesthesia circuits. All the meds were checked into the cramped pharmacy closet by our pharmacist assisted by the Guatemalan charge nurse. We ferried over bottles of anesthetic vapor, vials of local, pre-filled syringes, two part thrombin kits, anti-nausea tablets, blister packed pills—all the drugs we'd need to care for the hundred plus patients we expected to, as Scott liked to say, "surgerize."

"Dr. Brockton, did you bring the fentanyl with you today?" asked pharmacist Chad.

"Bella said you'd purchased some from the hospital for us."

"Yes, of course." My face flushed. "I mean, yes I was able to buy some but I forgot to bring it today." I tried to remember if I'd told her how much I was buying.

He looked uncomfortable. "You mean you left the fentanyl at the hotel?"

"Well, I locked it in the safe, of course." He looked relieved at the mention of the safe. I'd meant to put the vials in the casita's safe but they were still tucked down in the bottom of my suitcase. "I'll bring all the vials I have in the morning. I don't know that I have as many as we'd planned on."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, Dr. Brockton."

"You know you can call me Jonah."

"Yes, Dr. Jonah. I'll..."

"Chad, it's just Jonah."

"Okay...Jonah." He didn't meet my eyes. "I'll just check...Jonah...they may have some fentanyl left over from another team."

"Fine." I ducked out of the pharmacy storeroom unsure why I'd flustered Chad so much

when I'd been the one back-pedaling and lying for no reason. For no *good* reason. Fuck. This rattled me. I went off in the direction of the lounge, for a coke or something, but Amie intercepted me with an apologetic smile and a box of airway filters that one of her nurses had found. "I got a text from my son. He scored a goal yesterday. His first since playing on his new traveling team. I called them and my husband was so proud. Without his usual carping around the edges of things. Like the dynamic's different without me there. I think it's good for them." She smiled, fixing me with her green eyes. "Any word from Maggie or the kids?"

I shook my head, wanting to escape her attempts at normalization. "I should probably send them a breezy update. Let them know I'm doing okay."

Amie ignored my sarcasm. "You should. Things can get better."

After more unpacking and arranging, word came down that there were some anesthesia patients ready to be seen. Jeremy asked if I wanted him to get started on them. "No, I got it. Can you guys check to make sure all the anesthesia machines are in working order before coming up?"

He looked at me funny. "Yeah, sure."

As long as they all answered, no, I was good. The problems arose with the positive answers. The yeses followed by complicated explanations in impassioned, rapid-fire Spanish. Their desire to connect, to reach out, to thank me, to invoke God's input in my hands, made me alternately uncomfortable and grateful. I had gotten better at asking patients to repeat things though, and to speak more slowly, not that it did a lot of good. But with this, along with my Spanish dictionary and resorting to pantomime, I could negotiate most of the answers, and for

those which seemed important and stumped me, I would ask one of the interpreters for help. Aside from our team's interpreters, today we had help from an odd collection mostly of ex-pats but also a few Guatemalan English speakers. They came to interpret, to gossip, to eat the free lunch. Getting them to stay past lunch was nearly impossible so the more we got out of the way in the morning the better.

I lurched through triage. A never-ending stream of short brown bodies dressed in their Sunday best. The women wore blankets and managed some complicated wrap so that it appeared like a dress. *Hupils* the interpreter called them, always complimenting the women on theirs. Made examining them difficult. Gave up after the first few. Most of them were fitter than I was anyway, with their sinewy legs and tough skinned feet. I smiled, looked in their mouths at their appalling teeth, patted them on the back, scribbled a note, called them all low risk—ASA class II — and indicated if the breathing tube might be a problem. Called for the next one.

"Doctor Rapido," teased my nurse not unkindly. It was their Sunday as well, and they didn't leave until triage finished. So if we got through early, then all the better.

"No, no. Not too rapido, only for some things."

My nurse Vessily flashed a smile, blushing. She wore a wedding ring, likely had five children but still, she was pretty and it felt good to flirt. Distracted me from last night and what felt like the beginning of something, maybe a slight fever, my belly churning a little. Something had reawakened an aching in my back. In between patients I popped a couple of ibuprofen and two Percocet I'd found during the unpacking, hoping to head things off, keep me functional. Was all hands on deck until we finished. The pocket lint furred my tongue.

The next gentleman nodded, shook hands, and like my father, looked right through me.

He needed a hernia fixed. I pantomimed for the guy to take his shirt off. The interpreter looked at me questioningly.

"Yeah, yeah, shirt off." I pantomimed the lifting of his shirt. Felt grumpy waiting for the meds to kick in as well as fucking with the man because he reminded me of my father.

The interpreter shrugged and nodded and added something in Spanish.

The guy's eyes narrowed. What had she told him?

The man didn't flinch when I touched the cold stethoscope to his skin. His heart rate was incredibly slow, like a marathoner. He clearly worked much harder than I did, hernia or no. No heart murmur or anything I could hassle him over. On his back he had a mass the size of a golf ball centered over the middle of his spine. The skin was red and irritated, looking like nothing more than a callous gone wrong. But on his back? I asked the interpreter to ask him what it was.

"Is a...how do you say? A, bump? From rubbing?" The interpreter rubbed her hands together to illustrate.

It was fleshy and firm. Like a succulent plant. "What does he do for a living that there's rubbing?" I imagined something vaguely sexual.

She and the patient exchanged a few words with nodding. Something I didn't catch.

"He carries wood."

"Wood? Like lumber? Is he a carpenter?"

More conversation.

The gentleman looked at me while speaking to the interpreter.

"No. Firewood. He carries firewood on his back."

"Ahh." I nodded. Jesus. I'd seen men like him up in the mountains before.

"It's the pack then? That rubs?"

More conversation. The man shook his head. "No, no." More explanation.

"No. No pack. He explained some...some... arrangement?" She was pleased with the word she'd found. Apparently he chose some of the sticks and created a sort of framework. To this, with the help of some rope, he lashed the rest of the wood. These men looked like nothing more than snails, houses of sticks towering up over their backs and they hunched forward going at a near run. Or human dump trucks. The growth on his back must have functioned as a sort of shelf, or stop against which the whole bundle of wood chafed. As it dawned on me, the man, Pedro, spoke further.

"It sometimes bleeds and swells up, he says."

"Like now, is it swollen up now?"

"No. No." He gestured with his hands something the size of a grapefruit.

Jesus. "Ask him if he'd like the surgeons to take it off."

Pedro and the interpreter went back and forth for a while but the man shook his head and pointed at the hernia beneath his belt.

"No, he wants his hernia fixed, not the back."

"Tell him we can do both." I pantomimed sleep with two hands together forming a pillow and a tilt of my head. "While he's out."

The man understood now but still shook his head.

"No. He worries it would keep him from being able to work."

But the hernia would keep him from working. But this wasn't my business. It was between he and the surgeon. There were certainly repairs that could be done that didn't require

time off from work, but those were laparoscopic and required special mesh, special equipment. I'd never seen the surgeons do those here but maybe the new guy? I didn't know, and so let it go.

I nodded and we shook hands. If anything there was a softening in the man's eyes, not friendly but not quite so fierce. I knew I'd somehow be stuck doing the guy's anesthetic. Something would go wrong, I'd knock out his teeth or some catastrophe. It was predetermined. I sighed.

"*El proximo, señora,*" I said to my nurse.

"*Si, si, directamente,*" she sang in return.

Everyone of them, it's like they were ghosts of Christmases past. All the people I'd let down, disappointed, failed in some way, returned to visit me, dressed as Mayans with their carpet dresses and bad teeth. First my father, then was an old girlfriend, my wife, even my daughter who was nearly eighteen.

Feeling guilty? They all seemed to ask with their polite bows and formal manner.

Fuck you. I'm no more guilty than anyone else.

We broke for lunch at 12:30—meaning everyone: the doctors, the nurses, the staff. I felt a little funny as I passed all the patients sitting in the heat, still waiting to be seen. What would they do for lunch? But we left them there and all went downstairs.

The clatter of porcelain greeted me as I joined the rest of the team and staff down in the OR lounge. People jammed in close, eating and talking loudly as they sat on the long benches. There were hot tortillas wrapped in a towel, bread rolls, flat planks of beef, wilted broccoli, slices

of pineapple, refried black beans and a salad which looked tempting but I knew better than to chance it. There was even a chocolate cake under a glass bell. My stomach rumbled uncertainly but I found that I was hungry. I wedged myself in next to a pretty little thing—someone's high school daughter I remembered—and across from an interpreter and a Guatemalan nurse chattering away to each other.

"Carina, is it?" I said to the high schooler feeling more sociable now that my back had eased up.

Not in the least shy, she looked me in the eyes. "My mother warned me about you."

"What? Have we met before?"

"She said you play guitar and that I should sing with you some evening."

"Did she now? You must be Nancy's daughter then." Where was she, that well-meaning busy-body? "You're not sitting with her?"

She arched her eyebrows. "Would you?"

I laughed. "What do you sing then? Gregorian chants?"

"Jazz mostly but I could slum it up with your folk tunes."

"Ahh, I see. How is it that your generation is so sophisticated? At your age I wouldn't have known a jazz standard from a dog whistle."

"Well, I'm doing a minor in voice so maybe I'm not typical for my generation?"

But what was typical was her ending every statement in that up-tilting way they have of making nearly everything a question? I asked, "Pre-med, then?"

"Yes, but majoring in chemistry?"

"Chemistry? Why would you do that to yourself?"

"My father. Seems to think I need a fall back?"

"Yes, that's what I tell my daughter too. Can't rely on men these days."

"My boyfriend, he's majoring in sociology. Useless I tell him. He doesn't listen."

"Careful, you'll be paying *him* alimony."

"Oh. We're not getting married."

"No, I imagine not." Another thing about their generation.

"How old's your daughter?" she asked.

"She's a junior. Will get her to come along one of these days—if she'll come. Would you recommend the trip so far?"

"Yes, it's going well. Mom dragged me along to Mass already."

"Of course she did."

"I know. It's just what she does. But the cathedral *was* amazing. Do you go to church or do you sing folk gospel with that ironic twist non-church-going men seem to adopt?"

"Here, do you mean?"

"Well, yes, in general."

"I try to avoid singing things I don't believe in." The grumbling in my belly threatened trouble. I stood up abruptly. "You'll have to excuse me."

I scraped the remainder of the food off into the trash and left my plate to the woman washing the dishes along the back wall at a stainless steel sink. "Gracias," I said and ducked through the hall and to the men's bathroom.

After lunch, Laurel, one of the other anesthesiologists, and I teamed up to try and see the

remaining patients as efficiently as possible. Most of the interpreters had left, having had lunch and caught up on local gossip. We would double team, taking turns with the paperwork and questions and the exam. This would also allow me to make a run for it if my guts kept acting up.

Laurel and I had been anesthesia residents together, but prior to that she had done four years of a general surgery residency before deciding she'd had enough. Surgical incompetence infuriated her and I remember her threatening to do things herself if surgeons didn't hurry up. She had been known to place chest tubes when surgeons struggled with the procedure. Fiery, beautiful, Iranian. Swore in Farsi, blistering tongue, dangling earrings of gold that never stood still.

In our work, each of us had our tell. Hers was to talk louder and faster, to begin swearing. Others it was to hitch up their pants, to pace or to laugh. Mine was to become monosyllabic. Nor was it just anesthesiologists. Surgeons, nurses, techs, everyone had them. When stressed, when operating at the limits of ability and judgement, when things came fast and furious and was no time for niceties, for protocol, for kindness, we all lapsed into these patterns. In residency we learned to recognize and work with our tells. When things got sketchy and our tells surfaced, we knew to redouble our efforts. Those that didn't have that second speed, that turning on the juice, they were drummed out of residency. They escaped to internal medicine residencies, became psychiatrists, pediatricians, pathologists—cognitive specialties, they called them, their second-best callings.

Fleas, we called them.

Our nurse ushered in a mother and a young girl who looked to be about six or seven. The girl hung back, hiding behind as her mother handed me the papers and chart.

"How cute she is!" said Laurel. "*Que linda!*"

The girl buried her face in her mother's lap as she sat down. I handed Laurel the chart and she began paging through it.

"She's having a cyst taken off the back of her head," Laurel read from the chart.

I could just see a swelling at the back of the girl's head beneath her thick dark hair.

"Thinks it might be a hygroma or a simple cyst." We didn't usually do more than a couple kids each year—cases like this—lumps and bumps.

The mother parted her daughter's hair to show us the mass. It was much larger than I'd first thought. Might explain her shyness. Kids teased her no doubt. This was no little bump—was the size of a grapefruit or a softball but somewhat oblong, like an avocado.

"Who's doing it?" I asked.

"Lambros."

The girl pulled back from me as I touched it. "Wow, it's really firm."

Laurel got up from behind the desk to come look. "Oh, man. I don't know... Have you worked with him much?"

"No. Is there a CT or something?"

"There's nothing."

The mother asked if everything was okay. "Si, si," I explained we were just talking anesthesia stuff.

"Does it transilluminate?" asked Laurel.

That was a good idea. I explained to the mom we wanted to see if we could shine a light through it. In the dark, the little girl whimpered while her mother reassured her.

Even with the beam held to the side of the girl's head there was nothing to see—it might have easily been the weak light and her long dark hair.

"Would we do this back home outside of a pediatric hospital?" I asked.

Laurel frowned. "I doubt it."

I explained to the mother that we were concerned about the size of the mass and whether we were the right ones to be doing the operation.

"But it hurts her," the mother answered.

"What?" asked Laurel.

"She says it hurts."

"That's not good."

"We need to talk to Lambros," I said.

Lambros looked up when we went in after knocking. He was in his early 30's, which meant he hadn't been out in practice more than a couple years. He worked in a smaller hospital across town back home. Certainly not a peds surgeon but that wasn't to say he didn't operate on some pediatric patients, though they wouldn't be complicated ones.

"When you've got a sec, can we talk to you about the little girl?"

"Sure—tell them I'll just be a moment," to his interpreter. Lambros followed us out into the hallway. "Isn't she a cutie?"

"Yeah," I said. "But listen, we're worried it might not just be a cyst but something more complicated."

"Oh, it's a cyst—saw one just like this recently. Shucked out like a pea from a pod."

"Yeah, but it's the size of a squash. What if you're wrong? We'd just feel better if you ordered a CT scan first. Just to make sure."

His eyes narrowed. "Really?" The smile still hung on his face, but had lost its warmth. "You're going to expose that kid to the radiation, not to mention the expense. Listen, if it makes you feel better, if I get in there and it's not a cyst, I close up and leave it for someone else. That make you feel better?" He looked to Laurel and then to me more slowly. We'd pissed him off.

"We're not sure we should be doing this at all," said Laurel. I could tell she was trying to be diplomatic.

"You know she's come from like some far off place, right?" he said.

"The Petén. Would sure hate to kill her so far from home," I said.

There was no hint of a smile anymore. "So you decide surgical risk as well as anesthetic risk, do you?"

"Well, it should be a shared thing." I said. "Ideally."

"Where do you work? You do a lot of peds there?"

"St. Joe's. We do some."

He nodded. "Yeah. Well then, I leave it in your hands. You decide what's best. CT scan, cancel the surgery, whatever. I'll leave you to explain to the mom, too. Now, I've got a ton more patients to see, so if you'll excuse me?"

"Well, that could have gone better," Laurel said as we returned to our exam room.

"Thoughts?"

"You've already pissed him off, we do what we think is right."

"Yeah, I suppose. I hate this though. It's like I'm affronting his honor, his manhood. I mean, fuck him, but the girl, she has come from so far away. How about we order a CT scan?"

"I don't think we can be faulted for that."

We found our nurse and asked about getting the scan. She nodded, got us a form to fill out and assured us Mercy Missions would pay for the exam. They'd be able to get it done on Monday and get the results the same day.

I explained to the mother that we wanted to get another test—a fancy x-ray to make sure it was safe to do the operation. She looked skeptical but nodded as the nurse explained it further to her. It was after all as much radiation as flying in a plane across the country.

There were some other problematic cases—more than usual it seemed. Two women for hysterectomies who would need blood transfusions. An elderly gentleman with what sounded like angina for hernia surgery—we'd canceled him—of course he'd been Lambros' patient as well. Lambros wouldn't even come out to talk with us but stayed seated at his desk. "Yeah. Listen, I don't need anesthesia for him. I can do it under local."

We'd had to invoke Mercy Mission's guidelines—called him an ASA class IV.

"Can't do it," we told him. "Whether he needs anesthesia or not. The guy may have a heart attack any day."

And then Lambros put on the schedule a rectal mass. The patient was healthy but I couldn't remember ever having done anything like that here. Did the hospital have the correct staplers? It seemed like a bad idea but after all the other run-in's—this was strictly a surgical call but I still wanted to talk with Cruz about it. Meanwhile, there was a patient with newly

diagnosed diabetes, the usual hypertensives needing treatment and an elderly gentleman with failing kidneys that we referred to the internal medicine clinic. He would have to be done by a subsequent team after he'd been evaluated.

I managed to curbside Scott before he left. "I'm not sure Lambros gets it. It's like there's something he's trying to prove—that he can do stuff."

"I'll talk with Cruz about keeping an eye on him but maybe he's just getting acclimatized. I'm sure he'll be fine."

Fucking surgeons always stuck together.

After triage wound down, we collected near the entrance to the hospital. It had cooled somewhat with the sun now low in the sky. Amie must have already returned to the hotel.

"Sky Bar sunset, this way," Jeremy said, crossing the street. Laurel and I followed. Cruz made to follow but Lambros hung back.

"Come on, beer on the roof." Cruz said to him.

He hesitated but eventually followed along behind, he and Cruz talking about something I couldn't hear. No doubt complaining about anesthesia. F.A.T. surgeons called it—fucking anesthesia time.

Through the door of the robin's egg blue building, past the moped and bicycle rental shop and up the iron spiral staircase we climbed to the rooftop bar, the Sky Cafe. A birds-eye view of Antigua's rooftops, cathedral spires and domes greeted us. Off in the distance stood all three volcanoes.

"Hey, look who's here!" Scott, Bella, Amie and some others perched on barstools around a small table crowded with drinks long on fluorescent colors and little umbrellas. We scraped more stools over and plunked ourselves. Across the table Amie smiled in my direction but avoided my gaze. More drinks were ordered, days compared. Final tally, 107 patients scheduled for surgery. A little more than an average year. Doable but I didn't feel the usual excitement to get started. I tried to ignore Amie and Lambros laughing together over some story about one of his patients.

Back at the hotel I resolved to buck up. I wrote Maggie a chirpy email update. Asked about the kids, gave a pithy upbeat summary of my day, making much of it up, and attached a photo of the early morning streets with fruit-colored buildings framing one of the volcanoes off in the distance. Before sending it I noticed Amie in the photo walking with the others. I must have taken it just before she dropped back to speak with me. I sent it anyway like an emotional stowaway.

Continuing with my resolve to do the right thing, I took the fentanyl out of my suitcase and carried it down to the bathroom under the stairs. I fumbled with the in-wall safe unable to figure out the mechanism and the Spanish instructions. Feeling dizzy, I set the fentanyl on the counter next to a carved figure of a man sitting in small wooden chair and collapsed back onto the toilet seat. The little man with his mustache and black panama hat scowled at me—I guessed he was meant to be Maximon, a local Mayan god or saint or mythic person. Fuck up. A trickle of sweat made its way down my aching back.

Why was I here? Really. I looked at my bare arms, at the veins. Would naming them help? Cephalic, brachial, basilic. I should visit Antigua's basilica. Like Amie, light a candle, say a

prayer. I traced the intern's vein as it ran straight over the anatomic snuffbox. I'd left my son's velcro pant leg strap in my suitcase but had palmed a few syringes from the hospital. I was a walking contradiction. I was in trouble.

My stomach grumbled. In the confined space, the jangly walls and mosaic tiles wrestled with the shit smell and a wave of nausea swarmed over me. I held my head between my knees. The fecal smell became stronger with my nose inches from the wastebasket can. I tried kicking it off to the side but knocked it over spilling all the wadded up puffs of shitty toilet paper.

Someone knocked on the door, "You okay in there?"

Fuck. "Yeah, I got it." I sat up and the world swam crazy ways. I nearly passed out but vomited into the wastebasket instead.

They knocked again. "Are you sure everything's okay? Do you want me to get you one of the doctors?" It was my roommate, Mark.

I took a deep breath. "Thanks." I took an even deeper one. "I'm feeling better now." The fecal mixing with vomit caused another wave of nausea. After a while it passed. With my shoe I herded the wads of toilet paper into a pile. Using Maximon's little hat I scraped the pile back into the metal wastebasket. He looked pissed without his hat. I tamped his hat back down over his face. A muffled conversation came through the door as I stood up with the assistance of the towel bar. I ran some water and wiped my face and hands. In the mirror I didn't look much better. I retackled the wall safe and eventually got it open. I slid in the fentanyl, but before closing it, pocketed a vial. Ammunition for the gun to my head. Unsure of the reasoning but not the feeling.

Before dinner, at the team meeting beside the pool, Scott asked, "How are you all

feeling?" People murmured good-naturedly. "Tired? I sure am."

"Well," quipped Bella from beneath an umbrella. "if you didn't put your head between so many women's legs, maybe you'd feel fresher."

The general laughter worked as a perfect release from the anxiety and tiredness of the first day and Scott let it spool out. I sometimes made fun of Scott for his Labrador enthusiasm but I didn't give him enough credit. I wondered even if he and Bella scripted these moments, when I'd always written them off as rah-rah sessions and an opportunity for Scott to be the center of attention.

"I know you're all anxious to start tomorrow. To do what we came here for. To operate. After all, a chance to cut is a chance to cure, as my attending always said."

I hated those fatuous aphorisms. Surgeons had a weakness for them, a nervous tic, an oral tradition handed down to bolster spirits when things slid from bad to worse without apparent reason. *There is no cure but by cold hard steel!* But I'd determined to be more positive. Amie smiled at me from across the patio where she sat with friends. Maybe things would get better. I'd hear from Maggie and we'd patch things up. I'd shake the dog at my ankle.

"But seriously," Scott went on. "any of you ever feel like the stakes are different here? We do the same jobs that we do back home but somehow it feels more important here. Something about charity. I've heard some say it matters *less*, can even learn a new skill, practice on people in a place like this. I've never understood that. It says something awful about us but something which I don't believe applies to our team."

After Scott had finished, the chaplain shuffled up to the front to gave the blessing for dinner. John looked tired but like a dog that had spent the day chasing cars. His eyes shone. He'd

met with every patient. Not just the 107 scheduled for surgery, but even those that had been turned away for not having a clearcut surgical problem, for needing more tests, for having a different diagnosis than what was listed, for not being healthy enough, and these sometimes, were the ones, having traveled hours and sometimes days to get here, having to cope with the journey home and the disappointment of not having an answer to their problems, who needed him most. He prayed with them, held their hands while they cried, vented or took the time digesting all the information and what it might mean.

"We like to think we have all the answers—we certainly have the medical resources—but I'm in awe of these people's fortitude. Not to idealize them, but they are remarkable. I met a woman today that had come eight hours to have her gallbladder removed. Gallstones she'd been told. But she had no stones, no signs of infection. Instead, she has a mass. Something that needs further investigation. It may be cancer."

It became quiet.

"She listened to this news. With sadness. With disappointment. But above all, with a grace and acceptance that put me to shame. So much so that I felt like I was the one being ministered to. That *I* was the one suffering and she consoling *me*. Was I the one being taught a lesson? For she took this as yet another blow in a long stretch of adversity, a test, another trial that she *knew* was manageable with her God, her faith and her family. I am awestruck by what God accomplishes in their lives, whereas we have atrophied. We are weak and we are unworthy. We think we come bringing answers, bringing salvation, and so often it is we who receive the blessings and the lessons. I am humbled. And, I'm embarrassed to say, that it is these people that I fear, that I even sometimes dread—dare I say that? As your chaplain? I'm human you know."

There was quiet, sober laughter.

"But so often it is these ones that I fear to talk to because I'm afraid to hear their disappointment and regret, but they are the ones that, over and over again, I remember. After all the surgeries are complete. After we've packed our bags and returned home to our families, our lives. These are the ones that stick with me."

"That is all a very longwinded way of saying: listen. Remain humble, remain open. Learn from your patients, your friends, your colleagues, your family. For unless we are open to that, we will miss the most important moments, because we think we have all the answers, always think we are the ones rich in knowledge and resources, when sometimes, we are the most impoverished of all. So take a moment in your busy and hectic day tomorrow, to stop, to listen to something you didn't know you needed to hear."

Chapter Four

I woke late, missed breakfast and the devotional. I struggled to remember the code to the wall safe—Maggie's birthday—and stumbled to the hospital alone. There, I went down a wrong corridor and found myself walking along the collection of Santo Hermano Pedro's miracles.

In the dim morning light the boxed-in figures looked strange and eerie. Like brief moments of an alternate reality preserved in amber. Perhaps how miracles unfolded in real life. Confusing and unclear. Never what we want, what we expect.

In one box, dark-visaged Pedro flew, caught mid-flight or in the middle of a fall, I couldn't tell. There were donkeys, monkeys, a vast array of quailing men, women and children—afflicted, pained, suffering, while the figure of Pedro—God's electron—buzzed around their nucleus of misery, the ill-defined heart of things, working his little miracles but unable to knock things off their downward spiral, while God's mysterious force held them fixed in space like pinned butterflies.

The miracles lacked captions or explanation, and as the artist had created them without

regard for clarity or sense of occasion, I could only guess at the events. Pedro appeared somber as though the life of miracle worker, foot soldier of God, was one of endless toil and suffering. I expected to find a box amongst the others with Pedro hiding from the angels with a needle in his arm, might explain his pained expression and quixotic behavior. I considered returning with a sharpie pen to annotate the scenes. San Pedro feeds the monkeys. San Pedro gathers the orphans. San Pedro quiets the birds. San Pedro calms the volcano. San Pedro fixed the monkey on his back. He understood George Carlin when he said, Just 'cause you got the monkey off your back doesn't mean the circus left town. I made my way past this gauntlet of hermetic miracles and found the OR. Pedro needed another *caja de milagros*: San Pedro leads Jonah to the place of bloodletting.

Chad wasn't in the dispensary so I took a couple fentanyl for my first case, and, violating all rules and clinical norms, left the rest on the counter unattended.

Even as the Guatemalan OR nurse, Carlos, reassured my patient, she had already fallen asleep. I sealed the plastic mask over her face with my left hand, pinky hooked under the angle of her mandible. My arm straight, I leaned back, opening her airway, taking over her breathing as the anesthetic and muscle relaxant caused the expected respiratory arrest. After a moment, time enough for the full depth of anesthesia to take effect, I placed a plastic endotracheal tube into her windpipe with the aide of a laryngoscope—nothing more than a special metal flashlight. Something I could do in my sleep. I'd had an attending make us intubate with a spoon and flashlight to prove a point. I connected the tube to the anesthesia machine's circuit, confirmed its

placement with the bloom of carbon dioxide on the monitor and switched her over to the ventilator.

I taped the tube, marveling at the patient's spiked tooth with its equal and opposite retreat of gum and bone on the meeting jaw below. It reminded me of a guillotine the way it neatly met the bottom jaw. Carlos brought me a pair of extracting forceps. We didn't have a dentist with us this year so I would try and take out the offending tooth. I enjoyed these little procedures outside my usual scope of practice.

"*Dentista?*" Laughed Carlos pointing at me, teasing. Remembering Scott's words from yesterday, I felt a little guilty but it was better than leaving the tooth the way it was.

I made a bloody mess of it, but in the end managed to pull the tooth out and not leave behind any broken roots. It always surprised me how difficult teeth were to extract, even seemingly loose ones. I'd seen some strange teeth in my time of intubating people. Had a guy that had super-glued his front teeth in, not able to afford a dentist. I knocked the teeth out with the first touch of the laryngoscope, as I told the guy I would. "No worries," he said after waking up. "I'll just glue them back in."

Joe, an OB/Gyn surgeon in his early sixties, backed into the room with dripping hands. The surgical tech tossed him a green sterile towel which he fumbled and dropped. She got him another one, this time placing it directly into his hands.

Joe had aged since I'd seen him last but that had been only a year ago, hadn't it? In the impersonal light of the OR, Joe blinked behind glasses spotted with dandruff and spent eyelashes. His red-rimmed eyes watered a little. There was no request for music, and when I put

on Emmylou Harris there was no recognition or acknowledgement of the music we shared in common. I felt a sense of profound loss for this sliding into old age. I'd seen all the stages before, but in isolation. He was the first in which I'd witnessed the full range from a doctor I admired and respected, who I'd never thought twice about referring family and friends, to one that I now had serious concerns about.

I watched as Joe fumbled to open the surgical drape Lyssa passed him. It was like unfolding a tent. Lyssa had to fix his side so that it slid up over the patient's leg, and yet this was something he'd done for over thirty years. Joe looked blankly at the patient's perineum. Lyssa adjusted the light for him. I raised the table and tilted the patient's head back a little, aligning her introitus somewhere between hand and eye level.

His colleague, Julie, backed in, hands dripping. "You know, I've been thinking more about that fibroid patient I told you about. I wonder if we shouldn't just scope her. We can do that here, can't we, Carlos?"

Carlos nodded. "*Si Doctora.*" I thought he probably had a crush on Jules.

There was a pause, before the question registered with Joe. He answered in a vague way, clearly having no idea what she was talking about.

"What's *her* story, Joe?" Julie pointed to the patient they had on the table as she dried her hands with the towel Lyssa handed her.

Again the latency, but he was rousing himself. "Too many babies." I could sense his surfacing, reanimating with her prompting.

"Body's taken things into its own hands has it? Jettisoned *la matriz*?" Julie pushed a step alongside the patient so that she could stand a little taller. "Prolapse isn't the form of birth control

I would choose, but effective."

"Was she the one in triage," I asked. "that asked if we could write a note saying she couldn't have sex for a year?"

"She was so funny! She's got like what, ten kids?"

Lyssa handed Joe an allis, a surgical clamp with sharp inter-digitating teeth. The standard joke went that Allis, the instrument's namesake, must have been a real bitch, whoever she was. The length of the instrument amplified Joe's tremor and Jules took a large retractor, stuck it in the vagina, enlarging the target for him. His instrument clanked against the retractor as it found its way to the cervix. With sharp clicks as he squeezed the ratchet shut, the teeth bit in and now that he had an anchor, his tremor cooled, or at least became less noticeable. With a long-handled scalpel he sawed through the mucosa around the cervix. With Jule's prompting and with the familiar steps of a procedure he'd performed thousands of times, I was happy to see his old self return.

"Most of our work's been done for us by those nasty little babies," he said. With a hold on the cervix, he pulled and the vagina turned inside out and the vase-shaped uterus delivered itself most of the way.

"Chip shot."

"You and fucking golf," said Jules.

"Given it up, for Lent."

"And you, a good Jewish boy!"

"Thought I'd join the processions. Take a turn at the floats."

Jules exchanged the retractor for a syringe of local and vasopressin and injected around

the cervix and the uterine attachments, constricting the blood vessels.

"Have you seen the handles on those things?" asked Jules. "Each one is numbered and what I've heard is that each person carries the equivalent weight of the cross."

"No kidding?" Joe said.

"What, they fill the thing with lead?" If we'd been back home, I would've looked it up on the internet.

"Seriously, I think a lot of them are solid wood, not hollowed out at all."

Work was going quickly now. Clamp, clamp. Cut and tie. Symmetrical on either side the big feeding vessels supplying the uterus' blood supply. The uterus was the size of a small fist now but the amount of blood pumped to a pregnant uterus wasn't something to screw with. Don't fuck with the pancreas, was the general surgeons' saying, but the uterus demanded more respect in my mind. But of course OB/Gyn's got no respect, and, by and large, for a reason. There was only so much one could master in the four years of a OB/Gyn residency, and half that time was spent on pregnancy and delivering babies. But generally, these OB/Gyns were competent and kept themselves out of trouble.

I had been on other trips but with surgeons I didn't know and the level of anxiety had been intolerable. Slap-dash. Some surgeons weren't always mindful of where they were and what it meant for their patients in the Third World. Things had to go right the first time, there wasn't the back up like at home.

While there were specialists here that practiced at the private hospital in Antigua, they expected to be paid and generally felt that mission teams should be responsible for their own problems. If a team had a complication, shipping the patient to Guatemala City usually sentenced

them to death. While the mission teams were welcomed in one sense, in another they were resented and for us to dump our complications onto the state system was inexcusable in many Guatemalan doctors' minds. More often than not, if a serious complication occurred, the patient's family simply took them home and there the patient worsened and died. At least they were with family. That was more than could be said back in the States often times. Dying in the ICU seemed an awful fate. We often failed at finding a balance between the full court press and the 'let nature take its course' that was more typical here.

"You've heard the joke about the oncologist?" I asked.

There were groans. "Here we go," said Jules.

"What? I haven't," said the circulating nurse, looking up from her paperwork.

"So, there's this oncologist who's been treating a patient for metastatic lung cancer. The patient has done well with some of the newer targeted therapies but after a while these stop being effective. He switches the patient to the more toxic standard chemo regimen and that brings the patient a few more months but eventually even that stops working and the patient takes a turn for the worse and dies. Well, the oncologist is depressed about this and is mulling it over, wondering if there wasn't something more he should have done. At last he remembers one other drug he hadn't tried. Now, its side effects are especially bad and its efficacy debatable, but it might be worth a shot. So after work, he takes a shovel to the cemetery and digs up the patient's grave. He soon reaches the coffin. He puts his shovel down and with his hands scrapes the last bit of dirt off the coffin lid and opens it. But the coffin's empty. There's only a note pinned to the silk lining, saying, 'Out for dialysis.'"

The surgeons laughed even though they've heard it before. The nurse smiled. Lyssa, the

tech said, "I don't get it."

"Oh, it's really not that funny. It's unkind. Basically, the money grubbers won't leave well enough alone and treat people that are too far gone."

The conversation then deteriorated into anecdotes about the American medical industrial complex running amok.

"So," I said, hoping to redirect the conversation. "one of my partners, he's home on a Saturday morning, lying in bed with his wife. His son, who's about six, wanders into their room. So his wife calls to him, 'Hey, Billie, come say hi to dad.' Get this, his son, his son runs over to the phone next to their bed, and picks up the receiver and says 'Hi, Dad! Dad? Dad, are you there?' My friend's lying there in bed next to his wife, but Dad has become this disembodied voice over the phone—someone they visit at the hospital, have dinner with at the cafeteria."

There was some laughter but this hit too close to home.

The uterus came out with a last snip and Jules passed it to Lyssa who put it in a steel kidney basin. "Ovaries?" Lyssa asked her.

"Just uterus and tubes, been rode hard and put away wet, as you like to say." This last said to Joe but he missed the barb.

The uterus looked like a Greek vase, but with lips atop its narrow opening. Its initial rose color now purpled except for the cervix's white lips.

Carlos held open what looked like an old peanut butter jar and Lyssa dropped in the offending organ.

"What's next?" asked Joe.

"A few more of the same, " I said.

"How's our pinch hitter doing?" Julie asked as she cut the last suture of the purse-string closure of the vaginal cuff. They'd had another last minute surgeon shuffle for the trip.

From behind the drape, I hemmed and hawed a bit.

"What?" Julie asked, looking up. "Is there a problem?"

"Let's just say, she's not setting any land-speed records. You may have to do the last couple of cases that were scheduled in their room."

"Really? I thought they were doing simple stuff."

I didn't answer, but ducked down to finish up charting before waking the patient up.

"Huh." With a swift motion accompanied by a slight bow at the waist Jules broke scrub, popping the ties in back and shedding the sterile gown and gloves in one smooth motion. "I'll just take a look next door."

Joe and Lyssa removed the drapes and cleaned the patient's skin with a damp sponge. Just then the patient coughed and her legs came together as she began waking up. After removing her breathing tube and transferring her to the stretcher, we pushed her into the PACU.

Afterwards, in the hall, I found Jules seated at a desk completing her op report.

"Is Joe okay?" I asked. "This morning before you came in, he hooked like hell."

"He's just slowing down a bit. Nothing too radical."

"And that tremor? Too much coffee?"

"He doesn't drink coffee. But yeah, it's become worse. He mentioned that this might be his last trip," she said, continuing her chart completion.

"Wow. End of an era," I said.

She looked up for a moment, pausing. "Sad isn't it?"

I nodded.

"But what are you going to do, you know?"

But at the same time I realized she had come into her own, no longer the tentative new partner, but was now the workhorse, one of the primary engines that drove their practice. Good for her, I thought. God knows she deserved it as hard as she works. The natural order of things, but still, I felt bad for Joe.

In between cases, I bumped into Amie as she came out of a room, looking for suture.

"Hey," she said.

"How's your day going?" As she had on her mask, all I could see were her eyes but they looked pleased to see me.

"Oh, you know." She waved a few packets of suture. "The usual."

"Maybe we'll get to work together."

"Yeah." She nodded. "That'd be good. I gotta run, though, you know, they're waiting for these."

"Sure."

Laurel ambushed me after I left the men's room. "There you are. Looks like he was right." She showed me the little girl's head CT that had been done earlier that morning. The radiologist's report read it as a cyst. Possible hygroma.

I shrugged. "I guess we do her whenever Lambros has an open slot in his schedule." Seemed we owed him an apology. He'd take that well. Surgeons never wrong and all.

"Hey, would you switch rooms with me?" Laurel asked. "I promised I'd do your next

patient's anesthesia when I saw her in clinic. Would that be okay?"

"Of course. Whose room are you doing again?"

"Darmody's room."

"Darmody?"

"You know she's the Uro-Gyn filling in for Prescott."

She said in a softer voice which for Laurel was normal speaking volume, "She's a fucking disaster. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"How bad can she be? They've given her the easy room."

Laurel gave me a look, Really?

Dr. Darmody. Dr. Clematis Darmody. "Call me Clem." Late-thirties, tall, slender in a thin-skinned, wandery kind of way. When referring to her partner, meant only, her male significant other. We weren't too far along with the colpocleisis before I suspected Laurel of having lied to get out of the room.

"Now, what's a colpocleisis anyway?" the scrub tech, who worked OB and so didn't see more than C-sections, tubals and the rare C-hyst, asked.

"It's something we do for prolapse, you saw how her uterus was bulging out at the beginning of the operation?" explained Darmody. The tech nodded. "Mainly for elderly patients who aren't sexually active. Those we don't want to subject to the stress of a bigger operation like a hysterectomy. I basically sew most of the vagina shut but with some undermining of the mucosa to allow it to heal more quickly."

I noted Darmody's inability to talk and operate at the same time. It was a common enough

affliction but, while I joked that some surgeons only had two speeds: slow and slower, I'd have to revise that for her, slow and standstill. I'd counted on this being a quick case but Dr. Darmody looked to be the type who could make the trimming of a sow's ear into a blood bath.

It dragged on and on. What the hell was she doing? I walked around from the head of the bed to survey the scene below. The bleeding! It was streaming down from the perineum and collecting in the plastic pouch beneath. There was even more on the floor. The scrub tech looked pointedly at the blood on the ground and then to the surgeon with a frown.

"So, there's a fair amount of blood there, in the pouch and on the floor..." I observed, hoping to prompt a speeding up or at least acknowledgement of the mess she was making of things.

"There's probably some irrigation mixed in with that," she offered without looking up.

The tech shook her head to my questioning look and pointed to the metal pitcher brimming with saline.

I didn't need this. I cleared my throat. The whole point of this operation was that it was quick and simple. She'd made a lie out of both of those statements. It was all I could do to not say, It's a kindness you're doing, not an operation, as one of Joe's partners had been fond of saying. She'd also been fond of saying, Let's whipstitch the fucker closed and get out!

I began pacing. The circulating nurse frowned at me. I spoke to her in a voice loud enough that Darmody could hear. "See what you can find out if we need to give her blood. I'll need to draw an H and H here before too long as well to check where we are with the blood loss." I looked at the floor beneath Darmody's feet.

"Before you go, can you get me a towel for the floor?" Darmody asked.

Just like a cat, I thought, wanting to cover up her shit. It was at that moment that Jules came in.

"How's it going in here, Clem?"

"I've got to say, this woman's giving me fits."

"Want me to scrub in and give you a hand?"

"Would you? That'd be great. Could use another pair of hands."

Jules told the circulator her glove size and went out to scrub but not before giving me a raised eyebrow look, and asked if I'd thought about getting some blood.

I nodded "I'm checking a 'crit and will see about blood."

After being gowned and gloved, Jules bellied up to the patient.

"What do you think, do I have enough mucosa that it will all come together?" asked Dr. Darmody.

Jules hmm'd noncommittally. "Did you ever meet Joanna Deegan, one of the original partners of my group? No? She had a saying about a colpocleisis, 'It's a kindness you're doing, not an operation.'" She paused, taking in the blood and litter of instruments on the mayo stand beside her. "Well, looks like you've got yourself an operation. Do you mind if poke around a little bit?"

"No, please do." She sat back, arms folded across her chest and sighed.

"I think you've just about got it here, though."

Thank God, I thought, finally someone that could make some progress. But I felt bad for Darmody as well. It was stressful to jump into a trip like this. God knew we all had our trials and issues.

With a little blunt dissection and judicious use of cautery Jules staunched the flow of blood and found the appropriate tissue plane.

Meanwhile, the circulator had returned with a rubber-stoppered glass tube for me to check a hematocrit. I exposed one of the patient's arms and tied a tourniquet up above the elbow and as I found a vein, realized I hadn't thought about the extra fentanyl I'd left in the wall safe for the past hour, so distracted had I been by Darmody and her bloodletting. I filled the tube and handed it off to one of Guatemalan nurses.

"I think you lost the plane here, so I've just got you back on track. You want to take over or want me to finish up?"

"Oh, I can take it from here. Thank you."

"Not at all, I'll just get the closure started for you and then you can take it from there."

Just as Jules was scrubbing out, the nurse returned with a slip of paper with the hemoglobin level.

"The hemoglobin's 9," I said. "Low, but if you're finished with the blood loss we shouldn't need to transfuse her."

"Well that's a relief!" laughed Clem to Jules. "That would have been an inauspicious start to my first day here."

The day wasn't over yet.

"Well done, Clem. Tough case." And with that Jules left us to muddle through to the end.

By the time I reached recovery with my patient, I had begun to feel a little shaky and my nose was beginning to run. I sneezed a couple of times.

"Are you okay?" the recovery room nurse asked in the middle of my lackluster report.

"Must have caught something on the plane ride here. I'll be okay."

She made some sympathetic noises. I left her my paperwork and left without waiting for her to check vitals.

At lunch I felt a little better. I plated a hammered-flat slab of beef, refried beans, tortillas, some steamed vegetables and snagged a can of pop from the fridge. I looked around but Amie wasn't there, must have eaten already. Before I could sit down, Scott pulled me aside. My day was lurching from bad to worse.

"Listen, there's someone I want you to see—a patient left by the previous team."

"Really? Is that our responsibility?"

"I said we'd do what we could. Youngish gal, had her gallbladder out last week and now is jaundiced, feeling poorly, elevated liver enzymes. Cruz thinks they've ligated the common duct."

"Oh, jeez." I whistled under my breath.

"Yeah. I know. She wants to do a common duct exploration tomorrow, but in the meantime she's worried about her and asked if one of you could see her. Would you just lay eyes on her for me? She's in the *convalencia*." This was what they called the ICU for lack of a better term. It was nothing like an ICU. The crucial part of ICU being the nursing care and specialty backup resources which were entirely lacking here.

"Couldn't we transfer her to the national hospital?" I knew the answer, but asked anyway.

"Not really an option. We could transfer her but they wouldn't touch her—our

complications are our responsibility unless someone pays, and even then it's not a sure thing. As you know, there's some ambivalence to what we do here in the wider Guatemalan medical community."

I gestured towards my plate of food. "Should I go right away?"

"No, no. Eat your lunch. Just let me know what you think."

The beef, despite looking like it had been run over on the cobbled streets outside, tasted okay and only the prospect of seeing the *convalecencia* patient prevented me from going for seconds.

Even from across the room, I could tell she was sick. Instantly I was far more worried than from Scott's description alone. I would be hard pressed to say what made me arrive at this quick assessment. There was her sallow skin and sunken eyes, her blank staring, her failing to register my entrance, or my presence at all until I touched her hand, which was cool, her circulation clamped down. Her lips were dry, her breathing shallow and rapid. Her chart told the story of her worsening condition: increasing heart rate, increasing respiratory rate, falling blood pressure, labs trending in the wrong direction. Her liver enzymes were at a level that I worried about her clotting factors. She was still able to answer my questions, I was relieved to see, and her oxygen saturation was still adequate. At this elevation there was less oxygen in the air, so might be an issue sooner than I was used to.

"*Como está, señora?*"

"*Bien, bien,*" she lied, but then shook her head. "*Le duele,*" and she pointed to where her belly hurt.

I swore under my breath. I asked the nurse to give her a bolus of IV fluid as she was clearly dehydrated and to check her INR, CBC and 'lytes.

I found the Guatemalan doctor on call for *Las Obras* standing just outside the *convalecencia*, thinking to herself. "She's not looking good," I said. "Do you mind that I ordered some things?"

"No of course not, but she needs surgery, no?"

"Tomorrow."

"I understand this sometimes happens the common duct injuries, but still, she is young. Has children." She sighed.

"We'll do what we can."

"I know you will. Some surgeons though, they don't understand this is not like at their homes."

"Did you have a chance to speak with Dr. Cruz?"

"Yes, of course. We know each other from before. Other trips. She I trust. And your team of course."

"Thank you." Was probably just being polite.

"I notice your team does not pray in surgery. At least not out loud. That is okay I think. You do what you do and God does what He does. We shouldn't expect one to make up for the other's, how do you say? Inadequacies?"

"Yes. Quite."

"Thank you. Will be good to go to surgery soon."

Ugh.

I found Scott between the legs of another woman in the OR. Scott finished whatever it was he was doing.

"What'd you think?" he asked, speculum in hand.

"I think the sooner you operate on her the better."

"Yeah, that's what Cruz said."

The day finished with Jules and Joe doing the last two of Darmody's patients and still our room ran late. No time for a Sky Bar sunset, we instead walked straight back to the hotel and even then missed the team meeting—small consolation.

From back behind the bar in the kitchen there came a pleasant buzz from the kitchen staff. Rosa, who they'd hired last year to help with cooking and cleaning, was back amidst hugs and cries to see that she was now *embarazada*—pregnant. Despite her minimal English and the kitchen people's broken Spanish they managed to tease her about what a good Catholic girl she was, they all were. While shy and demure she couldn't help laughing in the face of their brazen American love. I smiled. Wished I could just be the cook for a change. Worry about the avocados and bob the fruit in the bleach bath.

At dinner I sat with Jeremy and Laurel. Shoptalk. Maggie hated it but it was therapeutic. I wondered if it worked better if both—as Darmody would say—'partners' were in the medical field. Might then be something to share, a bonding opportunity. Amie sat talking with Bella and Scott. Probably didn't work that way though.

As dinner wound down there sounded a pinging glass for attention. Scott stood, thanking

everyone for their dedication, their love. I sighed. I'd not been looking forward to this.

"It's palpable. Your patients feel it and are thankful for your time, your skill and your love. That's what it's all about. Why we return year after year. Why we ask our friends and family for money, for time away, beggar ourselves, to sweat, work and sometimes, cry. So we have a tradition, well, we have many traditions as you'll see."

There was laughter at this and Jeremy shouted, "Prom" and Laurel stomped her feet, "Shotgun Wedding!"

"We'll leave those for later, but now where's the ladle? Who's got the ladle?" Scott asked. "What? No one?"

In the back towards the kitchen I heard a scrambling and jangle of pots, pans, drawers of utensils rattling open before, bucket brigade fashion, the ladle made its way to him. A cheer went up. I smiled despite my myself. How ever much I resisted this tradition it still sucked me in.

"Here it is, the same one I don't doubt that many of us have spoken into, for the tradition is that each of the newbies must stand and give us your thoughts on the trip so far. If this ladle could talk, the things it would say. Surely this enriches our soups and stews. Maybe that explains why the food always tastes so good here? But newbies first. Tell us something. Maybe a person you've met or how you're feeling. It can be anything you want to share. Others can chime in as they are moved but first the tadpoles!"

There was general cheering and shouts of, Ladle! and Manatees! The tumult died and quiet settled on the group.

The silence nearly turned uncomfortable before a pale young nurse raised her hand shyly. Cheering went up as the ladle made its way to her.

She held it at her side and began, "I'm Sarah..."

Shouted instructions, "Talk into the ladle! Stand on your chair!" interrupted her.

"What?" she asked. "Like this?" There were nods and shouts of approval as she stepped up onto her wooden chair and held the ladle like a mic. She wobbled a little as she started, her voice wavering.

"I want to tell you about Rafaella, my first patient this morning. Just so you know, I've been really anxious about this trip. I mean, I don't usually work pre-op. I don't know very much Spanish. And, I don't know very many of you. But anyway, Rafaella is 25, already has five kids and was here to have her gallbladder out."

"What? You don't have five children already?"

She wasn't sure how to take this and shrugged.

"Late bloomer!"

"Why, yes, I suppose I am a late bloomer," she laughed, her cheeks turning red, her face bright. "But my patient, she was terrified, her hands clammy and cold...No! I told you, that was her, not me! Okay, maybe a little... She was shaking—yes, like a leaf. Big wracking shudders, like nothing I've seen before. And I don't usually do IV's and of course I blow the first one. Not having an IV or any drugs to give her I feel pretty useless. She's terrified, I'm not feeling so great myself. Nursing school doesn't tell you what you should do in situations like this. I fell back on, what? I don't know. I hold her hand. I stroke her hair. I smile, though I'm about to cry myself. I feel completely inadequate. I say the few words I know in Spanish and she has a few words in English. I ask her age and she asks mine. We realize we have the same birthday. We're the same age, she and I. We laugh a little at this, nervous like. But I don't know how it happened, but all of

a sudden, we're hugging. Complete strangers and we're hugging, and then we're crying and then laughing again for real," she paused. "And then the other patients all around us are laughing and crying and suddenly we are all family. Just like that." And here she began crying herself. There were tears all around the room as she continued.

"It was like nothing I've ever experienced. I can't say how else to describe it." She wiped her tears with her sleeve and shrugged. "Was the most amazing experience I've had as a nurse and I didn't even do anything, except mess up her IV."

At this, people cheered and shouted encouragement.

"I don't know what else to say, except, Thank you. Thank you, Sherri, for inviting me. Thank you all for putting up with me." She stepped down and her friend Sherri stood and hugged her to much applauding, whistling and stomping of feet. Amie's eyes caught mine and she smiled.

Sarah stood back up on the chair and raised the ladle, "Who's next?"

The clamoring began as the floodgates opened. People recounted stories and impressions from the past two days. Shining eyes, silent tears were the rule of the night. And laughter.

This bonding and enfolding of the newest members of this family began, not in any formally planned way but happening organically, needing a relief valve for the unrecognized and unacknowledged emotions of the last couple of days. The anxiety, the fear, the exhaustion and joy flooded out and the older members relived their own first times and saw with new eyes the joys of their mission, their profession and reassured each other that what they were feeling was right, was honorable, was normal and profound. I let myself enjoy it, forgetting myself for the moment. And other tadpoles now clamored for the ladle as they saw how it went, anxious to

discharge their own worries and anxieties, and each in turn was listened to, welcomed again and brought into this family. For this was the real welcome—the others all preliminary to this—and this had become a tradition not out of any formal planning but out of need, to decompress, to let it out, get it all down, to call out their roles as observers and instruments, to loosen the person inside and remind ourselves of why we went into this crazy job, why we came on these inconvenient, expensive exasperating trips and why, we returned year, after year, after year. I still remembered the first year I'd come and these moments allowed me to tap back into that if only for a short while.

What little there was of factions and politics fell to the wayside under this hydrant of emotion and love. There was the son seeing what his mother does for the first time. Had his eyes opened to what it means, what is on the other end of those missed ballgames, late nights, weekend calls. Today, he'd passed out watching his mother operate. In recovery, the nurses had cooed over him.

"I can't say I remember it all," he said. "There was a moment there where it all went dark and the floor swung up and hit me in the head. I don't know, maybe I'm a little squeamish." People laughed and the PACU nurses recounted how each time they sat him up he got all pale and clammy all over again. "There was that other time I passed out in health class. In the back of the class, seated, when a guy with a hole in his neck talked to us about smoking." Standing up on the chair, he looked down at his beaming mom and thanked her, blew her a kiss, and I could tell that for the moment, she felt less guilty about it all. I wished my kids could experience this but I wondered if that would ever happen now.

Janelle, one of the people who had been coming for years and worked in the kitchen, but

back home worked as a corporate manager, got up after the first-timers had spoken.

"I just wanted to say that over the years, my husband and I have made the rounds here in Antigua to the little businesses from whom we buy all the food you eat on these trips and these people, while initially strangers, have become like family and they all have family and friends who've been helped by your work here. But it's more than that, it's your love, because that is what it is, why you're here, what you do. You may not see it that way, it's your job, your work, what you do everyday but *here* there's something different. No, you're not getting paid for it, that's part of it, it's less transactional, more a gift. You're ministering to your patients and here it's closer to the surface, like with Sarah. But while we minister to them, they minister to us, love us back and we are healed, we are blessed by them. How else to say it? We're not supposed to be the broken ones, the sick ones, but sometimes I feel that way and that I come here to be healed through this process, this rebirth. It's a sort of baptism, immersed as we are on this trip with the work, the place, these amazing people. And I, we come out on the other side, better, stronger, lovelier." She was trying too hard, I thought, but then she made a pirouette, this middle-aged woman there on the floor in front of us all, there shone a light, indeed a loveliness like that of a unselfconscious child, something miraculous that Hermano Pedro might have envied.

Lambros stood. Laurel and I exchanged a look, but he recounted how he'd had a difficult gallbladder today, "as many of them are, socked in after years and years of obstruction, inflammation and infection, so it's like concrete. Nothing like it back home. And, we don't have fluoroscopy here! I'm looking for that critical view, but it doesn't come. It's like I'm carving something I want to see out of nothing, pretending, fooling myself because there are no anatomical planes, you imagine it, feel the force, or sometimes, like a hand is guiding you

somehow. My parents attend the Greek Orthodox church and love to remind me that our last name in Greece, means brilliant and shining, it's associated with Easter somehow, but I, their doctor son, have never shone that way, have not believed the way they believe. Science has been my religion, but I can truly say, that today, I felt something. I can't describe it very well except that I somehow knew where to go, which layers to dissect, what to discard as nothing and what to protect and carve out as vital, and I did this with some anxiety but I had confidence as well and I remember saying to Jeremy, this is going to be impossible and prepare to go open, maybe do a common duct exploration. But there was this shining path somehow, and before I knew it, it was done. The gallbladder lay free in the belly. The liver bed beautiful and cauterized, without bleeding, and I had no worries."

Jeremy stood and said, "I can say that I am not generally caught flat-footed with my anesthetics. I'm a good reader of surgeons and their bullshit," People laughed. "I can tell when they're struggling but I can tell you, today, today I was fooled. The operation was over before I knew it. Whoever was busy guiding his hand, left me in the dark!" More laughter.

"Well done," I said when he sat back down. I looked to Laurel. "Maybe he's not as bad as we thought."

"Bullshit."

"Let's just say," Jeremy leaned in close to us. "I want a different room tomorrow."

"See. I fucking knew it," said Laurel. "Can I read them or what?"

"Is that why you left me with the Clemster?"

She laughed out loud. "Sorry. I couldn't stand another second with her."

"Listen, there's a patient tomorrow who Cruz is going to do a common duct exploration

on." I explained the situation—none of us were excited about the prospect of another team's bring-back.

"Rochambeau, then," Laurel said.

I immediately lost with a rock, while Laurel and Jeremy went several more rounds, battling to avoid being float. As much as we complained about the surgeons, we'd rather work than float.

I caught up to Amie as everyone trailed off to their rooms. "Never fails to get me, that ladle thing."

"Wasn't Sarah adorable?" She sighed. "God, I'm tired though."

"I know what you mean. Looks like I've got a long day tomorrow as well. Doing that common duct thing. You?"

"Oh, we're in the same room." She smiled. "That'll be good. We can catch up some more."

Her roommate paused next to her. "Amie, you coming back to the room?"

"Yeah, I'll be right there. Jonah, I'll see you tomorrow then."

Chapter Five

The phone had been ringing for a long time before it at last pulled me from the ocean floor where I'd been sleeping, content in lightless oblivion. It was as though I needed to relearn how to breathe, relearn life. At home, Maggie would have slugged me, head under pillow, groaning, "Answer it for fuck's sake."

But here was only the ringing phone and me—and Mark. I could just make him out in the dark sitting up on elbows, asking, "What's going on?"

How often I'd wished I could transfer these middle of the night calls to a hospital administrator. But now I felt guilty. He looked vulnerable. Frightened.

I dug the phone out of yesterday's clothes. It was Ingrid Robertson. Something wrong with her husband.

Stumbled into clothes. Flip flops all I could find.

Elevator thoughts, as an attending called them, marshaling some form of coherence to one's thoughts after the dark smear of sleep.

Head filled with kelp and muck from the seafloor, I had difficulty thinking at all.

I stepped outside and shivered. Gooseflesh, like my skin was in revolt and on the march. Its spears poking out in warning.

Something in Ingrid's voice only now registered. I went back into the casita for the stat kit where it sat on the kitchen counter. I walked across the dark courtyard. It was deathly quiet. No lights except for a few along the brick path to the front office. Fountains had been shut off as well. All the corridor rooms remained dark but for *habitacion* six. Knocked.

Ingrid opened the door. Raw and panicked, she looked older than I'd remembered squinting in the light inside. Warm stale air crept from around her. It smelled fetid.

Inside their room, bibles on nightstands. Suitcases perched on chairs. Gavin from the bed called out, "I'm fine. I told you not to call him."

Half his face slumped down.

"He's had a stroke hasn't he?" Ingrid asked in a tight voice.

More light—I pointed to the other bedside lamp and there rose in me a panic. Jesus.

"I'm so sorry to have disturbed you," Gavin went on. "My wife, she worries."

"Shush, Gavin," said Ingrid kindly. Tear tracks shone on her face when she turned on the bedside lamp.

I sat heavily on the bed next to him. "Ingrid, tell me what happened."

"Oh, my God. I don't know. I woke to the sound of him falling. I helped him to bed but something wasn't right, like he was too heavy, not standing properly. I turned on the light. That's when I called you."

"Ingrid," scolded Gavin. "that's quite enough."

"Gavin, stop it, please!" Ingrid's face crumpling.

"Gavin," I asked. "Hold your hands out for me like this." I showed him, like stopping traffic.

He held out his right arm. The left remained at his side.

"Squeeze my hands." He gripped with his right but when I put my fingers in his left hand there was nothing.

What the fuck was I supposed to do? I stalled, made him do more stuff I knew he couldn't do.

"Smile for me, show me your teeth." I mirrored for him smiling. The left side of his face turned up in half a grimace. The right side sagged in a frown with a thread of drool from the corner of his mouth. My mind revved in a useless way.

"See, Ingrid? I told you there was nothing to be concerned about."

I'd run out of things to get him to do. I couldn't fathom the body's predilection for denial. Surely a cry for help might sneak through. The whole side shut down, in free fall, and all the other side can do is go on its way. No thought for the crashing and burning. Shut it down, seal it off. Begone! You're not part of me. Neglect—for of course this rang a bell for me, tinkled faintly in the distance. I couldn't place it, but no matter, it'd come to me later.

"Does he take anything?" I asked. "Does he have any other medical problems?"

She shook her head. "Something for blood pressure, a prostate pill."

"Aspirin?"

"He stopped," she moaned. "Bothered his stomach."

I just needed to get him out of there before something worse happened.

"Can you call Scott and Bella for me? We need to get him to a hospital. An ambulance. A head scan."

"We have evacuation insurance, shouldn't we fly home? The medical care here... I don't know."

"Do you have a flashlight or a headlamp or something?" His pupils looked unequal which worried me even more.

She began fumbling through their suitcases.

"No, I'm sorry don't bother. Call Scott and Bella for me instead."

I needed 911. Was that something they even had here? I had no idea. He needed a modern hospital. Antigua had one somewhere around here, but had never seen it. Should I put him in a cab?

Now Ingrid collapsed on the bed and began sobbing.

Fucking useless. I dialed Bella but no one picked up. *God damn it.*

I pounded on the wall above the bed. Maybe wake their neighbors. "Hey! I need some help here! Wake up!"

This alarmed Gavin, dawning on him that something was wrong. Fuck!

"Ingrid, I need you to stay with him while I get some help. Can you do that for me?"

Mute, she nodded and sat up only after I put my hand on her shoulder.

I jangled, now fully awake. I needed help. I needed an ambulance. I needed someone to tell me what to do. This wasn't my thing.

Outside their room in the corridor all was quiet. Like nothing had happened. I started quaking and was wracked with tremors. I pounded on the next door over until someone drew

aside curtains to look out. I couldn't make out who it was.

"Open up. I need some help!"

"Who is it?" asked a voice through the door.

"It's Jonah. Open up."

It was fucking Amie. Squinting, she rubbed her eyes, wore only a long men's tee shirt that just reached her thighs.

"Amie, thank god. I need your help. Your neighbor next-door, he's having a stroke. His wife's useless." Amie's nipples stood out on the swell of her breasts. Always the dick brain, registering, cataloging. It wouldn't shut off and yet it wouldn't go along the paths I needed it to.

"Give me a sec." She turned back into her room.

"What is it?" someone asked from the darkened room.

I returned to Gavin and Ingrid's room. Gavin was trying to get out of bed and Ingrid was holding him down against her.

"Help me, oh God, please help me." Her face ashen and drawn while Gavin tried to tug his hand away from hers.

I pulled the stat kit duffel onto the bed and sat next to Gavin so that we bookended him. Inside the duffel I found a list of phone numbers, hospital, embassy, Mercy Missions emergency contacts.

Someone knocked before opening the door. Amie stepped in, now fully dressed.

"Here, call Scott and Bella. They didn't pick up for me, I'm going to call 911 or whatever it is here."

1-2-3, it said on the emergency phone list.

I gave the operator our location but couldn't think of the Spanish word for stroke—attack of the mind? "Ambulancia! Ambulancia!"

That they understood.

"Scott and Bella are on the way."

"Thank you."

What to do in the meantime? All I could think of was MONA, MONA, fucking wrong acronym, was for a heart attack. But aspirin might be a good idea. Maybe an IV. I got Amie to help Ingrid with calming Gavin who now looked panicked like we all were but it was his wife's crying and anguished look that upset him more than anything else.

I blew the first IV before Amie got an 18 gauge in Gavin's flaccid arm. She then got him to swallow an aspirin with some water.

Scott and Bella arrived, so I asked them to call Mercy Missions to see if they had any advice about medical care here.

"I'm going to let the guard know to watch for the ambulance," said Amie. That was a good idea.

The ambulance arrived and the EMT's transferred him to a gurney and wheeled him out into the courtyard. We all followed.

"Should I go with him?" But the EMT's shook their heads. They only had room for his wife. She had rallied with the support and now spoke Spanish with them.

"I'll be okay," she said, climbing into the back.

"What are you doing to me?" Gavin called from the inside of the ambulance.

"You've got surgery tomorrow," Ingrid went on. "I'll call." She tried to smile.

"We could get a cab and follow."

"What would you do?" asked Amie. "He needs a head CT and a stroke team, if they have those here. That's assuming it's not a bleed."

We watched as the EMT's shut the back doors of the ambulance, drove up the steep drive and turned onto the street.

Mercy Missions called back to say they would send someone to check on Gavin and see about an air transfer depending on his condition. They reassured us that the hospital in Antigua was top notch and would likely be able to do what was needed.

"Oh, my god, how awful," Bella said. "But Jonah, thank you." They turned to go back to their casita. "Get some sleep. We'll see you in the morning."

In the aftermath, everything pulsed and shook. My heart thudded with heavy steps like an unseen monster approaching. I felt shaky as my panic cooled. I needed something. I had the stat kit but had left the fentanyl vial I'd been carrying around buried in my suitcase. There was the safe but I couldn't go there. Get something to eat, you idiot. "Hey, I think I may raid the kitchen. Want anything?" I said to Amie, hoping for company, distraction.

She shook her head. "I'm going to try and get back to sleep."

I stood outside the door to her room. "You sure you don't want anything? You look..." She looked rattled, her face drawn and pale.

"No, I'll be fine."

"Thanks. I couldn't have managed without you." I hugged her a moment, only it was awkward. Despite her warmth, I felt a reserve, a stiffness there.

"I hope he does okay," she said, opening the door.

"Yeah, so do I. Get some sleep. Thanks again."

"Goodnight," she whispered and shut the door with a click.

In the dark, I ran my fingers along the wall before finding the bar's light switch. The fluorescents blinked a couple of times, seeing if I was serious. The kitchen team had locked the bar up but the pantry stood open. The stove, fridge, sink, pots and pans hanging on a rack—all stood stock still, uncertain, like I'd surprised them in the midst of plotting something awful. I pulled a bowl off the shelf, felt its reluctance at my pouring cereal. My vision throbbed like I'd developed a cardiac heave, my body ballooning out with each contraction, WoaoW—WoaoW—WoaoW God on the bellows WoaoW—WoaoW—WoaoW blood in Gavin's head hammering—WoaoW—WoaoW—WoaoW

Amie found me in the outdoor shelter building a fire.

"I couldn't sleep," she said sitting next to the fireplace on the cushioned seat running the length of the wall. She'd put a coat over her sleep shirt which she'd tucked into pants.

"You want something to eat?"

She shook her head.

I struck a match and touched it to the paper handouts left from the day's devotional. We were making a habit of meeting over flames.

"My dad died from a stroke when I was fifteen." Amie said, her face flickering in the gathering fire light. "Why I became a nurse."

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

Amie shivered even as the fire grew and began licking up through the lattice of sticks and logs. On the wall, mask shadows shifted as the fire caught. I pulled a blanket from a nearby chair and set it around her shoulders. As I did, she reached out for me.

"Oh, my god," she said. "Poor Ingrid. That was just how my mother acted—incapacitated. It shattered her and I could only watch. I've never felt so helpless in my life. Not able to do a thing."

I sat and held her, anchored, steadied by her.

"I vowed, never again. That first year of nursing school, everything reminded me of him. Thought I'd never make it."

I stroked her hair, imagining if it'd been my father. Touched my lips to her head.

"You're kissing me." She pulled back. "I should go."

"No, don't go. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. Stay with me."

"You need your sleep, I'm disturbing you."

"Amie, I panicked back there."

She shook her head and sighed. "I just keep seeing my mother and the confused look of my father. He did that same thing, completely oblivious to what was happening. What do they call it, neglect?"

"Gavin kept apologizing for waking me. Saying everything was fine. I was like, this can't be happening. And then his pupil blown. God."

"Don't." She pulled me to her as though I might escape, her little sobs bumping me.

I held her—trying to be a friend, a comfort. She sniffed, wiped her nose on the sleeve of

her coat. Her breath rose and fell against me. That was enough. I was happy in my twisted screwed up kind of way. Not happy for Gavin's stroke, but not sorry to be there either. To be needed, but terrified she'd go. Feeling the rise and fall of her breasts. Remembering the procession, the swell of her ass pressed against me, her laughter, her wriggling. I didn't trust myself to do anything more than just be there.

The fire settled in the grate with a crinkling sound and Amie's breathing became more regular. I followed her breath with mine, in and out, in and out. Her head against my arm made it begin tingling. When tingling turned to numbness I shifted it down, brushing her breast.

"Do you see the lava running down the side of Fuego?" she asked. "Just think, it's been doing that the entire time, building up layer after layer. Making another mountain right next to the one that's already there."

I could make out an orange-red line tilting there in the dark, slipping downhill. Felt comfort sliding.

Amie sat up, as if to go. I groaned, "Don't." But instead she took off her coat, pulled the blanket around her and placed my hands on her breasts. Her lips brushing my ear, "I don't know who to be." Her hand strayed to my lap. I kissed her lips which tasted of smoke, of ash.

In my ear she whispered, "Is it comfort of need or need of comfort? You confuse me." She bit my ear, and whatever it was, slid into desire, slid into sex.

Beside the fire, in sight of the lava, with the sounds of dogs barking, we undressed each other, going slow, bumping heads, clumsy and stupid with the relief of it. Need unfastening us.

We fell asleep as the fire settled and died.

Amie shook me awake. Kitchen sounds floated towards us over the grass. In a hurry, we put ourselves back together, retrieving clothes, untangling limbs while the kitchen crew prepared breakfast around the corner. The faintest glimmer of light touched the sky as we returned to our rooms.