

KISS YOU WHILE YOU SLEEP

Michael Botur

Dr Georgian is reciting from her tablet the short story I made her write. Creative writing is a tool I utilise in the Airing Cupboard to get my broken doctors to look at their problems objectively. The Airing Cupboard is the church hall in which my *kintsugi* gather around me on Tuesday and Thursday mornings to air their angst. Display their damage. To glue their broken shards together with gold. A reminder that they once hurled themselves against something hard and were smashed. Whatever metaphor works for them. It's about healing.

Dr Georgian, whose young brain is so big it seems to enlarge her head, has been experiencing a condition she claims is nymphomania, though that's a non-clinical term best avoided. The closest clinical term which could describe Dr Georgian's decision to have sex with a patient in the physiotherapy spa pool is *hypersexuality*. Or just call it plain-old depression – not that it's easy to get a doctor of 20,000 hours experience to admit she has depression, nor any other flaws.

Dr Georgian keeps stopping, putting her tablet down and looking at me to see if I'm satisfied yet. I can tell she's staring at my black eye, thinking *I'm* the one who's fucked up. The truth is we're all fucked up. Every doctor in the room finds it hard to admit why they're here. The head of the Review Board has ordered each of my patients to complete therapy sessions here in St Luke The Evangelist Community Hall. The alternative? Never work in medicine again.

‘Doctor, I gotta head off in a couple minutes,’ Dr Anson complains, rearranging his shaky, shivering limbs, sitting up and flexing his cramped back. A person gets shakes and cramps when their body chemistry decides it can’t exist without the 17 carbon atoms, 19 hydrogens, three oxygens and single nitrogen cherry on top which, when artfully arranged, make up the hydromorphone we know as Dilaudid. I can barely grow a beard and I haven’t lived long enough to get a driver licence, but I know opioids. I know what Dr Anson is going through.

‘Tell us why you got a black eye,’ he says. The group nods along with him. ‘You weren’t always a therapist, were you, doc. *We* shared. Now *you* share. How come you get beaten up all the time?’

‘If you leave early, Dr Anson, that’s two hours you’ve completed with me, not three. That’s on you. Guys, you have to do your 99 hours same as me.’

‘*Hundred-and ninety nine* for you, doc. So we heard.’

I hold my hand up to say, Be patient. I roam the circle of broken doctors as if we’re playing Duck Duck Goose. ‘For years, you brought the dead back to life. The highest training for the highest salary for the highest stakes. You learned you were infallible. Learned you had to bury feelings of inadequacy. You became more skilled than 99.9 per cent of people in the world. But, because you skipped the part of your development where you became at peace with your human flaws, you fuck up. Deep down you WANT to get deregistered by the Board. You hate triple shifts. You mess up and they chastise and berate and discipline you, but they don’t sack you because they don’t want you to quit the hospital, because then they would lose power over you. So the Board of Reviewers sends you here, because you’re a sensitive person trapped in an insensitive profession. And you don’t know a way out.’

Their bulging eyeballs tell me they’re not used to being confronted like this. Their eyes are like Mya’s were when she saw I was going to heaven without her. But my broken doctors *are* too sensitive. Too sensitive is why tightly-wound Dr Georgian fellated an elderly heart surgeon at his retirement function. Too sensitive is why hospital reporter Dr Choi started tweeting the salaries of 103 executives before security tackled him off his office chair. Too sensitive is why Dr Chimamanda sewed her cellphone inside a patient because she was sleepwalking during the day because she had been up all night on a treadmill because the staff marathon team convinced her that a single ounce of body fat was unacceptable. Dr Anderson hoarded breast augmentation photos, Dr Moananui burgled an ambulance, Dr Barrows tasted the blood of an eight year old boy because it was Rh-null, rarest in the world, sacred, precious. Dr Cruz hoards stainless steel tools. Dr Rood steals Salisbury steaks from patients’ meals.

I look at the old cuckoo clock on the oak-panelled wall of St Luke’s. We have two more broken doctors to read their simple stories before we can conclude our session. If supervisor Dr Selby Chan finds out my broken docs haven’t done exactly 99 hours of therapy within three months, they’ll be asked to redo their hours from scratch. I’ll have to re-do my own hours, too.

As they plead with their eyes to find out whether the session is really over, whether they have really advanced another three percent towards returning to the wards, I come close to blurting to them how I broke, how I became *kintsugi*. I know they gossip about me.

‘Final thought for the day,’ I say, changing the subject, ‘We all *feel* we deserve to be hurt. But do we actually deserve that? Write me a 20 line acrostic poem in your books, please. Discuss Thursday. Be good to yourselves this week. You can go.’

I shelter in a corner of the hall and check my phone. Dr Chan has left a voicemail in the courteous, cold voice he uses to tell high achievers they are unsatisfactory to him. He says the Review Board are ready to see me. To see if me and my patients are cracked or kintsugi. My broken docs – people with student loans close on \$200,000, most of them – they’re offering to clean my house and wax my car so long as I can get them Category 1 Restricted Permission To Conduct Medical Duties on Hospital Grounds. Well – 50 percent of them, that is. Dr Chan is looking to accept the immediate return of 50 per cent of broken doctors to practising, so long as the savings they bring the board outweigh the cost of lawsuits. The Board will read out their list of cracked clinicians; I’ll counter with the doctors I think are ready to return. I’ll tell Dr Chan, as he strokes his grey wizard-beard at the head of the table, that Dr Clair Georgian’s clinical depression is attributable to a hormonal malfunction from a damaged pituitary gland haemorrhaging oestrogen and cortisol. Then I’ll book Dr Georgian an urgent brain scan.

When I finish checking my voicemails and fantasising about the fight ahead, my broken docs are still in their chairs. Their arms are all folded.

‘That busted eye: it’s turning green,’ Dr Abdil smirks. ‘I’d say the haematoma occurred 72 hours ago. And you’re limping, too. There’s 10 minutes on the clock, doc. How come you’re so hurt? You have to tell us.’

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I walk to the end of the warehouse walled with wooden bins full of fruit. We’re so deep in the warehouse, no one can see from the street what goes on in here. I fist-bump a guy from South Sudan with skin so black it seems to glow blue. I’ve heard he grew up in fighting rings, breaking other kids’ faces when he was five. After he got his refugee stuff approved he was actually a medical student here but couldn’t get his student visa extended so now he fights to make a living. He’s tossed away his passport. He doesn’t even resemble his photograph anymore ’cause the bones of his face have been dented like eggshell.

Mya first brought me here to score. She got a thrill out of this place. Mya always wanted to be smashed to pieces. She felt guilty for being statuesque with blonde hair and blue sparkling eyes and a ballet dancer’s body and terrific parents and a hard-to-achieve degree that put her on top of a lonely mountain of expectation.

I’m told there’s a space for me in the cage in 30 minutes. Til then I can warm up and watch fights and whoop and roar and throw fruit at the cage. The three skirmishes I watch are over in four minutes. That’s how hard people hit each other here. Two dreadlocked women, skinny, with strange wobbling breasts, claw at each other. One has been practising Muay Thai, evidently, and cripples the other with a knee to the jaw before putting an armbar on her opponent til she stops twitching. The referee looks out from the cage, searching the audience for a medic til his eyes meet mine, but I shake my head. I can’t help her. I’m not allowed to be a doctor here.

Two gang members, one a man-barrel with a stomach which wobbles like an ocean, the other almost seven feet tall and reeking of cigarettes so bad I can smell him

from outside the cage, grapple til they collapse, sleepy and slippery. The tall one vomits blood. A janitor trudges in with a mop and bucket.

Then Epic and Mega, the big bald twins who run the show, find me in the audience. Epic taps my shoulder with a finger hard as wood.

‘Just checking in on you, pal.’

‘I’m going up tonight, definitely.’

‘You positive you wanna do this again? Aren’t you a little... vulnerable?’

‘I was comfy for too long. I need the hurt.’

The man who waddles into the ring from the opposite side of the cage is an obese ball with pale patches across his tits. Those are blooms of a fungus known as Pityriasis versicolor, I want to tell him. His body’s constant sweatiness provides fertile ground for that stuff to bloom on the epidermis. I want to put him on Fungasil. I want to get my prescription pad back. You’ll have to keep your body as dry as possible while you’re applying it twice a day over 28 days, my friend, just dab it on, best after you’re freshly showered, and I’d like to recommend a dietician to—

An asteroid slams into my brain. Everything is moving in slow motion. His fist has gone around the side of my daydreaming head and smashed my ear. I’m rocked, collapsing, nauseous. I want to cry and go to sleep. Tinnitus. I’ll never hear again. He crosses the ring, slaps his wobbling arms around me.

I get a glimpse of Sudan in the crowd with his little fingers in his lips, whistling. Throw in everything, he’s saying. *Wriggle, squeal, scratch, bite. Come out of this, Doc.* I don’t have kids or a cat to go home to and my parents are dead. All I’ve got is my airing cupboard, my clients, so I growl back into the fight, headbutt the fat man and both our noses explode because I have to be punished because when you put somebody in an anaesthetic coma, they lie on the edge between here and gone and I took Mya to the edge, because she told me she wanted to see the view, right on the razorblade, and then she was gone and for that I deserve to hurt.

FIFTH YEAR

After four years of lectures and exams and parties and trying to hold on to being like all the other 22 year olds, me and my class split up across the country to do our residencies in real hospitals. Shit got real. No more sneaking away from our tutors to go and smoke. No more acting like we didn’t have to look after ourselves. I got assigned to Middlemore. The place was a factory. 1000 beds. 30 theatres. Three sites. 5000 staff. Half a million patients a year. Then there was me, the one bee in the hive regretting I didn’t get out earlier.

Me and some of the other kids moved into this red brick dormitory in Otahuhu with fancy arches and stained glass. We were close to a Samoan butchery, a Rarotongan bottle shop, an Afghani bakery. We helped out on the wards. We sat in on consultations. Old ladies stopped us on the street for praise, as if we were real legitimate docs. Me and my people limped into the tavern every morning at 10 for karaoke and pool. Old gambling addicts bought us beers and praised us.

I’d smashed every exam at school and I played centre in the A-team for the inter-schools soccer and still found time to get merit or excellence on all my exams AND keep friends AND learn about sex with a group of safe, clean kids. My first week in

Med Dorm, I found out my popularity wasn't just a high school phenomenon. When people heard anaesthesia was my major, they knew I was lining myself up for an extreme climb with some of the highest standards. Keeping people on the live side of death. Challenging, sure, but I'd never settled for anything less.

We tried to get through a week at a time. We had a party to balance every exhausting assessment. In the Halls we all had to prove ourselves by doing an IV stand while the boys on scholarships from Tehran and Tokelau whooped it up, everyone wearing scrubs and disposable smocks. The girls went as hard as the boys. The IV stand was like a keg stand, except there was an intravenous delivery with bags of ten dollar wine hanging off it. Dr Jodhi – Dadu – did a tour of the dorms early in the night to check we were still alive, but instead of scolding us he just dropped a bunch of cricket jokes and made conversation about Shane Warne vs Brian Lara and kissed the girls' cheeks and called them Betee. It meant daughter, Kyle Krishnan told me. That's what we were to Dr Jodhi: we were his beloved kids. He would tsk and chide, but he would forgive us for the occasional blowout. Dadu Jodhi trusted us.

This real tall girl, Mya, was strong enough to hold my legs vertical all by herself while I went to work sucking on my wine stand. I could hardly concentrate. I stared up her tree trunk legs, her muscular chest. I puked before she could tip me the right way up and the fizzy-bubbly-wine-sick went into my nose and they had to let me down so my airway wasn't blocked, and as I writhed in a lake of bile the acronym for the procedure for a blocked airway flashed behind my eyes like a billboard. Puked-up chunks of pineapple pizza stuck to my dick, hanging out from my meagre gown. Mya stood over me guzzling Jägermeister and laughing at my corpse, but the boys' slaps and pats and noogies told me I was in. I'd passed the Pissup Test. They hauled me up, applauded. I crowdsurfed. We raced each other to be the first to name the 12 stages in a ventilator inspection checklist while necking 12 shots of rum. An hour later I was asleep in the bathroom on a pile of mouldy laundry. I was wasted, but not wasted enough to override the switch in my brain that told me to wake at dawn and get to my lecture and annihilate everyone who thought they were smarter than me, especially Mya, with her "*Ermp, fail*" comments after every time I got the incus and malleus earbones mixed up. When the 6 o'clock alarm dinged on my phone I stood, washed my pits and bumcrack in the basin with hand soap, reconstructed what had happened last night. Mya, on the floor behind me, looked like a dropped marionette. I kneeled over her, studied the movement of her slumbering lips. Her oesophageal tract was cramped. I adjusted her head, brushed a sticky curl away from her brow. I hovered my lips over hers. I nearly kissed her while she slept. She was in paradise, though. Wherever she was, she would be happy. No triathlons. No supervisors. No swotting over blood types and allergens and lipid-oxygen bonding precipitors. No senior doctors in her dreams yelling at her hard enough to shake her hair. No guilt, no shame, no hunger. Just unconscious bliss.

Instead of kissing those lips I draped a towel over her, stepped into fresh beach shorts and jandals and a Hawaiian shirt I found on the floor of some dude snoring in a bedroom with three naked med students piled around him.

I walked to my Grand Round picking bits of bacon out of my ears. The city was waking up, even the birds were groggy, but us doctors had to get ahead. Dr Harkanwal Jodhi, Godfather of Anaesthesiology, was in the front of the meeting room, illuminated

by the projector, asking everybody if they could explain the TCSC of having an airway blocked.

TCSC... Total Combined Status... Circuit? No, Consequences. Everything in anaesthesia is consequences.

I stuck my hand up. Every kid stared at me as I answered.

‘When the oesophagus is blocked, like, even just 10 per cent is gonna stop you being able to aspirate your carbon dioxide,’ I ventured. ‘So, like, that C-O-Two’s gonna line your bronchioles like cholesterol or something. CO-Two makes the muscle in your airway all thick and saggy til it almost closes. Big time risk of stroke. Real bad if you’re obese, ummm – you said we’re supposed to flag it as a Code Orange compound complication in pre-op?’

‘Meester Delight!’ Dr Godfather clapped and grinned so wide I saw a flash of gold. ‘C-O-Two, every child! Two particles of oxygen and one of carbon. Dear friend of the oxygen we need in the air we breathe. Tell me this importance, child. Tell me how many one day international test caps M S Dhoni is having, child.’

I picked a shard of vomit from the yellow stubble on my lip. ‘Uh.... 156?’

‘158.’

‘Nerd.’ Somebody threw a drink bottle against my head.

‘INSUFFICIENT!’ Dr Jodhi slapped his desk. He grinned wickedly. ‘156 milligrams of sodium pentathol: patient stable. Two more milligrams, we are taking the patient to 158, Meester: is this patient stable?’

‘Patient critical,’ I mumbled, and hung my head.

Mya limped in towards the end, just when Dr Jodhi was talking about the different ways rhesus-negative blood absorbs opioids compared to Rh-positive blood. She’d showered and put on a miniskirt and heels and even wore her stethoscope. As she sat down in front of me with broad sporty shoulders, a waft of fruity shampoo went up. Mya was blocking out the presentation. Blocking the adulation from our godfather.

‘*Down in front,*’ I whispered.

She half-turned her head and sneered.

‘*Fuck you.*’

‘*Make me.*’

She winked out of the corner of her eye and said in a low voice, ‘Get to the top of Mt Aspiring before me, I’ll fuck you.’

*

I’d never found anyone as competitive as me til I met Mya. We were obsessed with one-upping each other. A dancer since the age of four, Mya was two inches taller than me, even without high heels, which she put on at least once a week when she dragged me to another social. We’d drive up to her dad’s yacht club and suck oysters out of the shell and swish massive glasses of chardonnay. Then the next night she’d have boxfit with a couple of the girls from our rheumatology group and go clubbing afterwards and I’d limp behind her, unable to match her shot-for-shot, and watch in a corner with folded arms while she zig-zagged on stage, her huge hips bumping against her friends. There were only 168 hours in each week but she seemed to fit in 50 hours of tramping, 50 hours volunteer hearing and vision checks on poor kids in the ghetto, 50 hours partying and fine dining, not to mention 50 hours networking with the old boys so she

would have her first hospital career lined up after she graduated. Lined up before *me*. That's what it was all about with Mya. She liked me cause I was a threat she could stay ahead of.

First time we kissed was with blue, numb lips on the summit of Mt Aspiring, shivering, trying to find each other over screeching wind that sucked the flapping jackets off our skin. We had sex in a longdrop toilet buzzing with flies as soon as we got back to the hut where we'd left all the other med students who couldn't keep up. Every other time we made love after that, there were three of us present: Mya, me, plus an enhancer, some tingly lubricant or a bottle of Schnapps or a pill or a canister of nitrous oxide she'd smuggled from work in her pussy.

Our tenth lovemaking session, Mya pulled out a bag of weed and a pipe. We knew we could both hold out for longer when we were stoned. It was part of the race. The time after that, Mya slipped a bright, shiny 80 milligram circle of OxyContin between my lips and I couldn't stop falling through the clouds. She used her strong arms to hold me inside her while turbulence tried to flap my body away. I was skydiving towards the landscape of her body and my ears hummed and when I slammed into the mattress, I came so hard it felt like my heart was being sucked down into my stomach and shot right through her.

I panted for ten minutes afterwards. By 12 minutes, I got Mya to use her HeartCheck to confirm my BPM was coming down. The Oxy made us move slowly and forget everything as soon as it happened. Mya found her HeartCheck amongst drawers and drawers full of stuff she'd swiped from the wards, stuff she didn't even need, like speculums and scalpels and marrow scrapers.

'Babe,' I gasped, clutching the white sheet against my heaving chest, 'Oh my God. That's gotta be the best shit on the planet.'

'ERNP. That's a fail.' She slowed her breathing so she wouldn't seem as exasperated as me. 'Carfentanil is the best on the planet.'

'You have GOT to get some.'

'I wish. Only Dr Jodhi can get you a script. Ten mils will get you high. 50 milligrams'll kill you.'

Before I knew it, she'd pushed a pill inside me again – a different one this time, though, a little grey square, like a Lego piece.

Mya put her hands on her ankles and pulled them up around her ears. Her vulva looked like a ripening orchid. Her thighs were wide pale petals. Clitoral hood, clitoris, labia minora, urethral opening, vaginal opening, perineum...

'That one was Dilaudid, by the way, it'll get you tooooooasted,' she sang, laughing, knocking a bottle of champagne off the sidetable. She grabbed a hunk of my hair and mashed my face into her orchid. 'Hurry up, already. I'm way ahead of you.'

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I was a tonne of bad things – drunk on exhaustion, addicted to coffee and cycling and punishing myself staying up til 2am memorising chemical compounds and their antidotes – but I had to let everyone know I wasn't a nark. Well, I was, and I wasn't. I was on top of everything. I could dob Mya in to Dr Selby Chan's Board of Review in a heartbeat; or, I could party just as hard as Mya. Either way, I showed the world only what I wanted them to see. I would drink six jugs at a Grassroots Rural Medical Club

garden party and still wobble home on my bike alive. I would hold my liquor deep inside me, metabolise it, beat the intoxicant, piss it out, glug another triple shot espresso, bike another 20 miles. I passed breath tests. I put blankets on trainee interns sleeping shirtless on the balcony of the clubhouse. Making other people comfortable, tucking them in – it was all part of being superior. I watched over them while they slept. Nothing was better than outlasting Mya, especially when she'd had a screaming match over the phone when her mother wouldn't release any more money from Mya's trust fund and Mya would try to drink herself into a coma just to stick it to her mum. With no idea what to do outside the wards, bored in our apartment, we would race to see who could pour a bottle of tequila into 25 shot glasses and down it all. If you spilled a drop, you had to lick it up. I loved it when Mya staggered around on her hands and knees then collapsed. I would get a cloth and wipe her face then use a glass bottle to keep straight the seven cervical vertebrae of her neck and whisper in her ear, '*Beat ya.*' She would try to kill herself and I would one-up her by keeping her alive. Then I would kiss her while she slept.

SIXTH YEAR

From the moment I locked my bike til the moment I left the hospital, my days were about waiting for disaster to strike then feeling a sting of excitement or disappointment as another day went disaster-free. I was amazing at my job and there would be a career waiting for me as soon as I graduated. The little squeaky anaesthetic technicians, with their pathetic three-year degrees, always joked about us Sleep Doctors being like air traffic controllers. Depress the plunger of the syringe; plane takes off. Watch the monitor for hours, putting your nose to the lips of the patient. Plane lands. 'Time to wake up, sleepyhead.' Applause, occasionally, if Dr Jodhi read the printout and saw our patients had avoided tachycardia.

Best part of the job, though: a free snifter of something special. See, along with the other gases we get rid of when we exhale, almost all the anaesthetic passing through a person's blood gets processed through the lungs, half of it aspirated through a patient's cool lips. If I leaned in real close over a patient's nose I could take on a sneaky snifter of relaxation when the surgeons weren't looking. Just between me and the patient. Our little secret.

If Dr Jodhi wasn't trailing behind me, demanding reports on cricket or cardio, I would lock myself in the dispensary so I could sign out drugs without being interrupted. Patients' half-used anaesthetic bottles on my trolley supposedly headed for the incinerator; personal bottles up my ass. Mya and I would bump into each other in the corridors and we'd both be walking wide as cowboys with bottles around our private parts. 'Howdy, pardner,' we'd wink at each other, and smile and kiss if we had enough gear to give us a good day off.

Didn't matter if I was sitting in on surgery, doing pre-op checks or post-op, filling out timesheets or just sitting through Grand Rounds: As little as half a tab of ParaCodeine would melt the anxiety away. Just hearing the names of the drugs on the patient's notes made me relax. Dilaudid made me think of eyelids snapping open, irises dribbling colour from 100 Crayolas left in the rain. Isoflurane sounded so laboratory-pure that whatever it did to my body, I wouldn't be responsible for. The hard, industrial dare of desflurane. The stay-away-I'm-powerful of sevoflurane. Demerol made me

imagine crisp, clean, white things. Vecuronium sounded like a Roman noble. Respiridol, a breath of fresh air. Fentanyl sounded like a fountain of bliss. Mya and me were only in the apartment at the same time a couple of days a week but she would usually leave my meds taped to the bathroom mirror if she scored first. Not sharing was seriously uncool.

I thought about fucking other girls but there wasn't anyone who spiced up the sex like Mya. Besides, any other girl in the world would judge me for the way I chose to relax.

On date night, me and Mya would run codes as we cycled over to the cinema.

'What's code purple, hotshot?'

'Failure to respond. Aspirate.'

'What's code square, then?'

'Allergic reaction to Augmentin.'

'Code black?'

'Suffocating.'

'Who was the first batsman to score a double century in an ODI?'

'Sachin Tendulkar, *BITCH*.'

'You sound just like Dadu, lol.'

It was a rainy Saturday and everybody on the planet was watching the World Cup when Dr Jodhi presented me with a lab coat with my name embroidered on the breast pocket. I had so much morphine in my blood I couldn't make eye contact. I slumped against him like we were embracing, lay my head on his shoulder, thanked him.

'You are sleepy, betee?'

'Sorry, Dadu. Just trying to keep up with you.'

He patted my shoulder. 'You need to rest for the First Eleven this Saturday, no? We take Canterbury District Health Board and we KEEL DEM!' We hugged and laughed. 'Be good to yourself, my boy. Unwind.'

Last night Mya had put a red lightbulb in the bedside lamp, shot me up with 20 milligrams of Propofol and pulled me into some red, sweaty swamp I didn't come out of for days.

'I *am* unwinding, Doc. I promise.'

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I ran the shower and used my private time to push a tiny 16 gauge needle between my hallux toe and index toe, singing 'Distal, proximal, we won't forget 'em all.' The medicine shoved the stress out my cells and my body thanked me straight away. It told me I had needed this all my life. I'd never even had alcoholism in my family tree but as I watched the shower water bead on my skin, as I drank it and gargled it and tried to snatch steam-fairies from the air, giggling like kindergarten, there was a voice crawling around the back of my skull whispering, *This has always been in you*.

Dilaudid is more powerful than any gas, and Propofol is more powerful still, but only Fentanyl will get you into heaven.

The shower steam danced with the helices of my DNA and popped and fizzed and slithered into my toes and wriggled into my balls and pushed on my prostate gland and I fell backwards into the bath. Pink food colouring swirled along the white porcelain enamel. It darkened to beetroot juice, then raspberry sauce.

I staggered back into the sober world when I heard the crack of a whip and I sat upright and the strobe light switched off and the 200 frames per second I'd been watching slowed and I decided the folded-armed woman in front of me wearing a scowl and trembling lips was Mya. There were flames shooting out of my cheekbone where she'd slapped me, but I was somehow dry, as if she'd slapped the shower off me, and I was in a grey ward, a hospital, God damn it, and there was cotton bandage around my skull and she was mad not cause I'd cracked my skull and lain in the bathtub til the hot water ran freezing and I'd turned purple, nah, what really pissed her off was I'd done drugs withOUT her, and she had a shift beginning in ten minutes, and she was going to have to go to work COLD FUCKING SOBER.

Mya, immaculate in a \$600 dress her Mum had paid for, directed her growl right into my ear. Tucked-in tightly, I couldn't wriggle away. Her lips brushed my ear as she pretended to kiss me. It would be the first kiss in weeks. We never made love any more, just injected each other's spines and writhed on our damp bed, masturbating, then slept the day.

She squeezed my scalp and showed her canine teeth. *'I'm gonna pay you back for this, you little prick.'*

Dr Jodhi entered, glowering, shaking his grumpy musk all over. Mya kissed and squeezed him extra-hard. Fucking showoff.

'What is process for discarding the phial of Fentanyl once drawn, eh? Speak, boy. You are naming for me 12 risk factors when administering the epidural to an epileptic. Who is vice-captain of the Bangladeshi, hm? Who has thrown more overs – Yasir Shah or Kuldeep Yadav, heh?'

He shifted his gaze to Mya.

'You, miss. You are taking care of Meester?'

'Oh, we've got a plan,' she hissed through her fangs. 'Next time he does something this stupid, he knows he could die.'

SEVENTH YEAR

Patient Priyanka M. had trouble relaxing the lower half of her body to let her baby out. I elbowed the nurses aside and rubbed topical anaesthetic across her back with my hand, whispering susurrations. As I bent toward the floor to pull the wide-gauge needle from my kit, I licked the Lidocaine cream from my fingers, quietly shivering as the beautiful cocktail of sodium, nitrogen, barium and boron soaked through the palatoglossus into my lingual nerves, my trigeminal nerve, my hypoglossal nerve, the glossopharyngeal, from the lingual to the vagus, tickling my throat, warming and cooling all at once.

The sleepy grin I gave the team was drunken, cheeky, slutty. I licked my tingling lips, told the frightened-looking nurses to steady the patient and directed the gracefully curved tip of a Tuohy needle expertly into the patient's lower thoracic nerve.

Patient Priyanka gasped and squeezed the sides of her cot. Quickly I pushed towards her corda equina, set up the rigging. I'd practised on Mya. We'd made love with tubes sticking out her back, crunching as we writhed and wriggled and shuddered. I just managed to push in the loss-of-resistance syringe and feed the milk of the poppy inside the patient's dura mater before I let go of the rigging, dribbled some instructions

to the nurses to plug the patient's release button in so Patient Priyanka could squirt heaven inside herself, walked crisply out to the corridor, leaving a commotion behind me as I rounded the nearest corner, tugged on three, then four, finally five cupboard doors before I found one as inviting as a hotel, walls two metres apart, with a paint-spattered aluminium basin to sit on so I could tear off my sock, jam a needle between my toes, tickle the medial calcaneal nerve with a little drink of bliss then plunge the needle's depressor down so hard I blasted all the way up to my sciatic nerve. I rolled hard onto a pile of buckets.

FINAL YEAR

Mya cracked her femur falling down some stairs and they gave her a blood test and the nurses looked at her results and ran and got Dr Jodhi. When she woke, she was a nobody, just another victim trapped in a plaster cast in traction. She'd be outcast soon. Dr Jodhi was scribbling on his prescription pad but he was angling it protectively away from her. He even shunted his chair back a foot from her bed. He wrote her a script for morphine and she glared at the pathetic quantity he was signing off. 'Don't you have anything stronger?'

Dr Jodhi later told me if she didn't have the cast on her leg, she would've lunged at him like a vampire. I agreed it was a shame, what had happened to her.

I tried to hang out with the boys but everyone was dispersing to Vietnam or Canada or the South Island. I was losing my family. They were off being paramedics or rural doctors or lecturers. Some of them had even admitted being a doctor was too stressful. They'd gone and quit and now the worst drug they did was cholesterol.

At home Mya shot up and watched TV all day. She saw this thing on Discovery in which a tiger was sedated with 100 mls of Fentanyl. She took up the challenge. We still had some Fenties in the vegetable drawer in the fridge. She dosed as much as a tiger, then as much as a dolphin, then as much as an Indian elephant.

'Smash it,' she said one day, just as I was about to go to work. 'Crack it open.' She pointed at me the knife she used to scratch inside her cast. 'IMMEDIATELY.'

There was nothing around the house to crack through the plaster cast on Mya's leg so I went to the basement of our building and borrowed a spade with a good sharp edge. I did a few practice whacks on the arm of the couch, then the coffee table.

'I don't think I should do this,' I told her.

'Then how the FUCK am I supposed to get to my femoral vein, genius?'

'I... I think I need a hit, first.'

She nodded, and made a 'hurry up' swirling motion with her index finger. I injected myself then shot her up through the crappy saphenous vein on her foot to appease her while I got ready for the big injection. Then I was ready to take off her cast.

The first few whacks with the spade cracked the plaster. The last whack cut into her muscle. Mya cried and peed into her dressing gown and bled on the couch. She didn't want a bandage, though. Mya begged for another squirt.

I dialled for an ambulance and they rushed her in while she cried, 'Carfen, carfent, cuff,' sliding between alive and dead. Her re-broken femur, weak and cracked and sharp, had punctured her femoral artery and her leg was blue and fat with blood leaking inside her like a garden hose.

Dr Jodhi chased the stretcher down the corridor, crying in Hindi. The only word I caught was *Betee*.

'Fentanyl won't do it, Dadu,' I told him on the edge of the operating theatre. 'It has to be the strong stuff.'

He looked at me with hurt, wiping tears off his glasses. He'd let his children cling to his legs. We were dragging him down.

'With apology to the god,' he sniffed, and withdrew his pad and signed the authorisation. I raced to the dispensary, got the Carfentanil, and on the way back paused with the vial in my hand, licking my lips, just staring at the prize I was holding. 24 carbons, 30 hydrogens, a couple of nitrogen and oxygen atoms positioned on the compound just-so. Symmetrical and beautiful. I was standing outside a giant, white, clean toilet. I could lock myself away right now. Escape all this.

No. Resist, man. Patience.

They said there was less than four minutes to get Mya's leg opened up, fresh blood put into her and the severed lower section of the artery rerouted. There were eight people in the room, half of them just healthcare assistants mopping up blood as Dr Jodhi clamped the upper half of the pulsing artery.

Mya gasped and kicked and tried to sit up.

'ANAESTHETIC! 10 MILLIGRAMS ONLY, BASTARD FUCK!'

'I'm on it, I'm on it.'

I plugged her in, pushed the trolley to the corner, tubes everywhere, and stood there with my nose against the heart monitor watching Mya's plane in the air, shuddering against turbulence. I depressed 10 milligrams of Carfentanil into her tubes and her vitals dropped, then lurched, then dropped again. Her face went from purple to white as she lost a full litre of blood, then one and a half litres.

Nobody paid attention to me. Everything was shouting and shoulders.

I bent over her lips and kissed her goodbye. I squeezed the depressor and pushed into her every last drop from the fountain. 20 mls. 30. Finally, 50. Clear and pure, Carfentanil slid into her bloodstream as her plane fell silently out of the sky. I sucked the loaded breath from her lips and the nurse began bellowing at me, 'WHAT DID YOU DO?! WHAT DID YOU DO?!'

*

So, broken docs, that's me. That's my story.

They had no one else to run this therapy thing so we made a deal. I do a certificate in counselling, help you guys out, get my hours, maybe get back on the ward. First I have to help you. All of you.

I have to prove to Dr Chan I can watch over my broken doctors while you're awake.

And, if you trust me, I'll be there while you sleep.