

ID

by Ginnah Howard

He does not read what he's giving them permission to do to him, just signs the release. The tremor in his hand when he squeezes the pen ekes out its own message. His nose is running and he is cold, an ache that spreads from the bones of his feet, his wrists, the sockets of his hips. Diarrhea and puking to follow, he knows. Terrible dreams. Someone places a warm something around him, hands him a wad of tissues. Just need to check your vitals. The pump of the blood pressure cuff tightening makes him clamp his clicking teeth: he's tying off, the end of his belt clenched in his mouth. He wants to moan. Maybe he does. Then someone in white reaches over and hands him a paper cup, pink liquid, glowing inside. Thirty milligrams. In half an hour, you're going to start to feel better. Tomorrow, twenty. Monday, ten. By Tuesday or Wednesday your system will be clean.

He follows the pink glow down, flashing into the rush of his blood, washing up along his edges. There's a plastic band snapped to his wrist. His ID bracelet: Mark Merrick. In case he forgets who he is. In case when they check his vitals there aren't any there. His vitals. If he had the strength, he knows he could do a riff on that one. Why don't I walk you to the smoking room, she says. It's open twenty-four hours, every day. She shows him the safety-lighter in the wall. Just like the one at New Vistas. Yes, he nods, he's used these before. Soon you may feel like a shower, clean clothes before you get into bed, she says. Just push this button if you need anything or come on out to the nurse's station when you're ready.

He lights a Camel, takes the smoke all the way down. The comforting hiss of the radiator: radiating, radiating. He reaches over and opens the refrigerator. Shelves of water, juices. Gingerale. Cold cuts. Withdrawal Heaven.

They say it only takes seventy-two hours to kick. Seventy-two hours for all the opiate to leave the body. Kicking on your own: seventy-two hours of being inside the torture cage, up to your nose

in black water: cold, and the dope-snakes biting you all over. But with methadone you pay the piper less. That's why he's here. He is sick of being dope-sick. He's heard there's an even quicker fix: they knock you out, drain your kidneys, your liver, few hours later you're all better. Follow-up pill-a-day, keeps the cravings away. Even if you take a hit, you can't get high.

The main thing: put the dope-demon out on the street; double lock the door. He remembers the time some junkies robbed the guy in the apartment right below where he and Sammi were staying, blow-torched the center panel right out of the door. That's the way the junkie-joker operates. Extreme measures always up his sleeve.

The shower is hot, pulses of heat prick the muscles of his neck. Under these lights his skin over his bony ribs has that shocking hue of things long under rocks: colorless, see-through.

The sheets are hospital-clean. There's someone in the bed just beyond the divider: a compadre of the depths. A quiet breather and the methadone is in charge, not a high, just a steady patrolling of the perimeters.

How did he get here?

Really he doesn't have a real ugly habit. Usually keeps it under control. Shoots only two or three times a week. Takes it easy going through a bundle. Usually holds back a little to come down slow. Takes a few weeks off before he shoots again. Not like Rudy. A real super-duper dope fiend. Picking and scratching. Got the junkie-itch. Sores all over his body. Keeps ripping off the scabs. Nasty. If Smithy and Rudy hadn't had all that money, he wouldn't have gotten so fucking wasted. Every breaker blown.

Only the shadow of hall-light through the half-open door.

Dark. Bring it on. He's got a lot he needs *not* to think about.

Aaron.

You knew he was delusional, but you left him up there in his cabin all alone. Getting weird messages from Dad. Our father, who... Father? Where was he? Blew himself to kingdom-gone.

And what about you? The Wizard who beakered up your chemistry, fucked the formula for sure. Eight years old and already a monster. Misfire. Misfire.

Stay with me, Mark. Wood is safe; stone is dangerous.

