

Happiness

by J.A. Pak

It was incredible pain. Waves and waves that had Will rolling on the ground screaming. After an hour of mental handholding, Chess took him to the emergency room.

The pain was centered in the lower right quadrant of his abdomen; Will was sure it was appendicitis. He had to lie down. The waiting-room chairs had arms so he went flat on his back on the hospital floor. The pain was slowly progressing into unbearable territory; Will thought he was going to throw up. The restroom was two yards away. There was constant traffic between Will and the restroom.

Chess knelt beside him. The nurses weren't happy that Will was on the dirty floor but they left him alone. The big clock above him ticked away as the large double doors near his head opened and closed, gurneys with injured people sliding past him.

They'd been in the emergency room for almost an hour: there was a baby that couldn't stop screaming and the faint smell of vomit in the air. A group of Japanese came in, all wearing face masks. The emergency room was just half full. Patients seemed mostly healthy except for the baby and a young woman who was burning up with fever. Her boyfriend had her wrapped up in his arms. Mysteriously, the Japanese were herded away into another building.

Through an intercom Will's name was called. Chess helped him walk through those large double doors and into an examining room where a male nurse had him change his clothes before helping him onto a bed. Will shivered fiercely in the hospital gown.

"Let me get you some blankets," the nurse said. "There. Better? Good. We tend to keep things cold. I know it's awful but it keeps the germ count down."

Will kept gripping the metal guards surrounding the bed, half rising in pain, almost as if he were about to give birth.

"We'll get the doctor to see you as soon as possible," the nurse said. He was so cheerful, so patient, so reassuring, so familiar. "And

then we'll pump you up with meds and get you as comfortable as we can. Just hold on a few more minutes."

Will nodded.

Meanwhile a hospital staff officer came with a thick packet of financial and legal paperwork to be signed. Will was in no state to read legalese, so Will opted to give Chess his power of attorney.

"You're sure you want her to have it?" the officer asked. "Because she'll make all the decisions from now on."

And Will said with contentment, "I can't think of anyone better."

"We're married," Chess explained. The officer smiled, happy with the answer.

The doctor came. He asked Will five questions. He seemed to have diagnosed Will's condition with one look, the questions basic and redundant. "Kidney stones, most likely. But we'll get you scanned just to be sure."

The diagnosis was a go signal for the nurse. Within five minutes, Will was pumped full of Toradol, Dilaudid and Zofran.

"Dilaudid," Will said, giving a thumbs up to the nurse.

"Almost worth getting kidney stones for that," the nurse joked. "Now how do you feel? On a scale of one to five, one being no pain and five being pretty lousy."

"I'd say three. Going on two," Will reported.

"That's what we like to hear," the nurse said, happy. "If the pain gets to four, call me, and we'll get you back down to three. We want you to be comfortable but we don't want you floating off to space, if you know what I mean."

On the drugs, Will felt very calm. He'd thought the drugs would make him drowsy but he felt fully alert and at peace. Will wasn't sure if he'd ever felt like this, his thoughts remarkably tranquil.

"I'm surprised I'm not still in the waiting room," he said to Chess. "I got treated so quickly."

"You jumped the line. There were several people ahead of you, including the screaming baby and a woman who was burning up with fever. I think it was because you were lying on the floor moaning. That really helped your cause."

"I'll have to remember that the next time I'm in the emergency room. I don't think I could have planned it any better."

"Kidney stones. I thought it was going to be something serious. I was sure they'd be wheeling you off to surgery. You had me really worried."

"Me too. I had no idea kidney stones were this painful."

"I think we must have the world's most cheerful nurse," Chess remarked.

"Is it the drugs or does that nurse seem really familiar?" Will asked. "I feel like I know him or something."

"I keep thinking the same thing," Chess said. "Oh! I know. He looks just like that actor—you know, the one we saw in that movie last week. That comic."

"Yeah. He could be the guy's twin brother," Will agreed. "You don't think it's the actor doing research?"

"Maybe that's why he was so liberal with the drugs," Chess joked.

Will held Chess's hand with gratitude and love.

"I've put you through a lot," he said. "You must be tired. You haven't even had a chance to eat dinner. Why don't you sit down. It might take a while to get the scan."

Chess agreed. There was a chair near the foot of the bed. She was still feeling jet-lagged from her trip to South America—she'd met so many people, visited so many farms and factories—her body buzzed with the trip's vibrations and she couldn't keep her eyes open, thoughts lost in the background noise of the hospital.

The tiny examining room was near the ambulance entrance. The corridor was busy, firemen and police, people in traumatic distress, gurneys and the sound of their wheels against the hard floor. Nurses and paramedics joked about sandwiches, their attempts at sneaking away for late dinner breaks, a quick smoke. Will's first wave of pain had attacked him around five that evening. It was already ten.

Outside, in the corridor, a new struggle was beginning. There was an elderly man, six foot two, weighing maybe two hundred and thirty pounds. He kept arguing with the nurses: "Where's my sweater?"

Someone took my wallet. Someone took my wallet! Where's my sweater?"

"Sir, you have to stay on the gurney. We don't want you to fall again."

"I know what's going on," the man said. His voice was choking with anxiety. "You're all in on it. Someone took my wallet."

"Please get back on the gurney!"

He struggled to find himself. The nurses tried to soothe him; they asked him questions about where he lived: "Yes, yes, I live alone. My wife died. That was years ago. I live alone now. I used to teach. At the college. I have an apartment. I've lived here a long, long time. But it's not really an apartment."

Several times the man tried to force himself out of the gurney, but lacking strength, became entangled instead. Frustrated, the staff began threatening him, treating him as if he were a very large, very naughty child. Terrified, he refused to speak again, moaning, "Leave me alone, leave me alone."

After this, for a long stretch, there was only quiet.

Will watched Chess. She was soundly asleep, fatigue creating shadows on her face. He remembered that first time she was asleep in his arms, on the floor of the airport, the blizzard raging away. They shared so many memories now, Chess and Will, tiny unremarkable memories that came surging through him as pure joy. His sorrow was that he hadn't married Chess years and years before. Then regret dissolved and time was no longer relevant: in a total compression of heart and soul, his memory claimed Chess from the very beginning of his birth. Yes, he'd known Chess all his life and he was going to know and love her for a fourth year and a fifth year and a sixth year and on and on until all the years were a suspension of love and happiness.

A young orderly came in and asked, "So, you ready for a ride?"

Chess woke up. She felt as if she hadn't slept at all, just merely floated along with the consciousness of the hospital.

"Is it all right for me to come?" she asked, gathering all their possessions.

"Sure," the orderly said, getting ready to push the hospital bed out into the corridor.

Chess walked alongside the bed as Will and the orderly cheerfully bantered together. Will was still hooked up to his meds, still calm, still relaxed. Chess couldn't help smiling. Which was strange. Everything felt strange, like she was hooked up to Will's meds too. Maybe she was dreaming. But she liked it. Because for the first time, she actually felt married. To Will. That she and Will were really married. And she smiled and smiled. She and Will were all married together now.

"What are you laughing about?" Will asked.

"Nothing. I'll tell you later," Chess said. "Later, when we're home."

"Home. I can't wait."

Their home together.

