

Don't move

by Jodi Barnes

the MRI technician reminds me as I'm loaded into the capsule. I pretend I'm on the set of Doctor Who; no, I am the chick whose petrified remains are found by Charlton Heston in the first Planet of the Apes. Equipment failure enters the orbit of my stationary brain. At least there's no radiation and the tech says I should be done in 45 minutes—or so.

Before this claustrophobic voyage, she turned my left palm up and placed a weighted blanket along the length of my arm. “I know it's not comfortable but we have to open up that shoulder to see what's going on.”

Due to my injury or awkward positioning, three fingers begin to tingle. My shoulder is caged in some offensive lineman's gear. I hear her voice cut into a classical radio station piped into my ears through bulky headphones. I'd requested jazz.

The machine is screaming like a public disaster alert, quite audible despite the musical placebo. She told me to relax as I took off my shoes and first lay on the conveyor bed. “Do you meditate?” she chirped. “This would be the perfect time!”

I soon lose my sense of time. My toes are cold. I've heard that some people freak out, squeeze the plastic pumpup thing (in my good hand) for all it's worth. I try to block out what this giant magnet is doing to my cells, to ignore my numb arm, to prevent inevitable thoughts of death to reenter my consciousness.

I choose distraction. Play a *Don't Move* association game from early memories: my parents' Sunday morning glares when I squirmed in the pew. My mother's lips pressed over her teeth to hold straight pins—or was it my aunt? The one who whipped up an A-line skirt so that I could enter the Macon County 4-H Pageant. The girls in my Sunday school class needed someone without acne or glasses who could walk in heels. I took the bait and fourth place. Fishing with dad and grandpa, learning *don't rock the boat* is a literal and useful command. Getting stitched up after I fell—head first—from a

top bunk onto concrete. The imperative of school photographers. Chinese finger trap. Hair cuts. Hornets. *Be still.*

The tech turns off the music. The capsule blares. I am in Jurassic Park with Sam Neill. I am Timmy, descending the electrified fence, almost toast. I am Karen Silkwood, a deer in the headlights, then showering off plutonium. A garbage truck is compacting my brain.

She walks in, rolls me out like a tongue and I try not to cry for joy. I get to rub my arm and sip water before my neck is imaged. "Lucky you," she says, "The neck takes the shortest time but you have to be even more still for it." Before I'm re-inserted into the plastic tube she adds, "If you have to swallow, do it gently."

I won't think about my throat. Or allergies. I know the power of suggestion, the underbelly of magical thinking. Broken stemware, cracked cell phones, even my first-born at 6-months-old slipping from my careful hands. (Her reassuring pediatrician prescribed Valium—for me.) I sew neurotic seeds of caution just before reaping catastrophe.

I return to the game. Freeze tag. The hider in Hide and Seek. I fast forward to adulthood: epidurals, the spinal before my c-section, mammograms, convincing my nine-year-old to let the Merle Norman lady pierce her other ear. *Hold on.*

The tech turns off the music again. The sound of Star Wars' lasers with 1000% more base reminds me of Vader, then James Earl Jones' sublime vocal chords. My throat itches. I slowly move the back of my tongue in an effort to close my epiglottis. It still tickles.

Maybe I *should* think of death. Peace. Never coming out of my capsule. My pelvis relaxes followed by the muscles hugging both femurs. I am suspended in an afterlife of hard plastic noise pollution. I'm going to give up. Surrender into nothingness. Face my alter-ego saboteur and capitulate.

But consciousness is a twisted bitch, my OCD-ADD brain a Satan-spawned toddler screaming to leave, to bust through the convex roof of this contraption. And if that doesn't work I will scooch out butt-feet-shoulders-repeat until I can rip off my neck guard, throw it against this trailer wall and scream a slight variation on Peter

Finch's line: "I'm freaked-out as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!"

Suddenly my science fiction-turned-fantasy flick fizzles and I remember that my feet are chilly. The tech's voice, now angelic, tells me that the next image is under three minutes and then I'll be done.

I have to pee so badly.

