

An Uneventful Night in an Italian Hospital

by Joey Delgado

Thirty seconds.

Only thirty seconds between injection—a not unpleasant blast of cold in my arm, a flower pinwheeling open on a crisp autumn morning, lavender petals dusted with a glittery layer of night frost—until the medicine reaches “my head”—and I say “my head” because it is in my head where the medication's effects bloom, but also in my head is the thought, the feeling that the sudden eradication of all my pain, the certainty my life's trajectory is barreling down the one true path—a path so clear it may as well be paved with bricks painted the cheeriest of yellows, the type of yellow that floods a room on the sunshiniest of mornings—the swell of good cheer towards my fellow man, my fellow woman, my fellow antelope is like the swell of an orchestra holding an angelic chord—fortissimo!—for as long as the players' bows and lungs can sustain, a wall of sound rising to the balcony, to the very back of the mezzanine where the exit signs glow emerald green, and everyone in the audience is me, overwhelmed with appreciation, moved to our/my feet, our/my arms raised, reaching for the heavens, for beyond “our/my head,” beyond our/my known universe, for something beyond—

The call button is in my hand. Why is the call button in my hand? Oh yes, the pain! I can hardly recall the pain. Maybe I should press the blue button to call the nurse back and apologize for wasting her time, and, also, tell her she is the best nurse in this whole wide and verdant world. Florence NigthenWHO?

No, aside from *grazie mille*, I have no way to communicate my feelings. (Love?) She would be the fourth nurse I've fallen in love with during my stay.

“My, my, my. You certainly have love enough to go around, don't

you?"

The voice is back! That voice, like milk and honey, like mother, like the school nurse who bandaged my scraped knee.

"You're here," I say. "I knew you'd come back."

"You did? How did you?"

"Because." It is all I can think of to say. The voice is silent. My answer is not enough. "B-because, your voice, the way you talk to me. You don't like seeing me here, in this hospital bed. You want to take care of me, to make sure I don't spend another night alone in this room."

"I had no idea I was so altruistic," says the voice. If she had a face I'm sure she'd be smiling. "The truth is, Guiseppe, I like your company."

"Same. I like yours." I love everyone. "Are you gonna show me your face tonight? Disembodied voices make me feel crazy."

"Hmm, I am not sure, now. Apparently I'm your guardian angel. What if my face and my voice do not reconcile with the picture you have of me in your head? Can your mind handle such dissonance?" I feel nothing but good. "Sure," I say.

"Very well."

From the shadow at the end of my bed emerges a figure, a naked woman with impossibly long arms and legs. Her skin is an unnatural gray color and her head is an oval topped with straight, straw colored hair. The woman-thing's mouth forms a perfect, lipless O. I am not afraid.

I only love.

I know her.

"You do not seem surprised," she says. Her mouth moves up and down, like a puppet, or a ventriloquist's dummy.

"You're not what I expected, but I'm happy just the same."

"What are they giving you?"

"I know you!"

Her empty eyes widen, and from her O comes a kindly laugh. "Do you now?"

"I mean, I've seen you before."

“On the wall of a church, I'd imagine.”

“Yes! San Gimignano. You're a deadly sin.”

She curtsies. “Lust, at your service.”

“Oh my God, that painting. Demons were hammering this golden stake into your...your...area.”

“Lovely, isn't it. Catholics, am I right?”

“Right. There's some dark shit in every fresco.”

“Oh yes,” she says as she grips the plastic footboard of my bed with her long, gray fingers. My body tingles, fireworks under my skin, as she gets closer. “We're always in the dark corners or lurking along the fringes, looking for a virgin or a saint or a horde of riffraff to corrupt. We are never front and center, but we are always there, which I think was the point. Tell me, how sick are you of the blue diva and her haloed bastard?”

“You were always my favorite part. I mean, not just you, but the dark stuff. I always tried to seek out the dark stuff.”

“I know. I saw you take a picture with your phone. In fact, if I looked through your phone, how many demons will I find, I wonder?”

The shame I feel is a benign shame, an impish, adolescent shame.

“That's probably a bad thing,” I say, my head down, but smiling. “Is it bad?”

“It isn't bad at all. As a matter of fact—

Lust flickers, then disappears. Where did she go?

“Hello? Is this about how you look? I'm fine, I'm reconciled. Just come ba—

Ow, ow, ow. I hold my side. The knife returns, both knives. I feel them in my sides, tearing a hole through the tissue—the skin, the fat, the sinew—making way for the phantom hands. Ow, ow, ow. The phantom hands are back, squeezing my organs. I grip the rail of my hospital bed with my right hand. In my left is the call button. I press it. I press it again.

Where is she? Where the fuck is she? I hate this nurse. Nurse fucking Ratched. If this were America I'd sue her negligent ass.

“*Buon'notte*,” Nurse Ratched says as she enters the room. “*Come stai?*”

"DOLORE," I scream.

