

Meta Stasis

He dreamed that a dog was pissing on his face.

Chris Lowery groaned, struggling to evade its fetid trajectory, and in the process stirred awake. A dog was, in fact, pissing on his face.

“Geroff!” he grunted, shoving the mutt off his chest with delirious effort. He wiped the piss off his face as the mangy thing scuttled down the alleyway with a wounded yelp. Chris rubbed his bloodshot eyes with the backs of his hands, trying to blot out the blinding glare of the sizzling midday sun. His head was pounding and his throat felt like it was lined with cactus. There was a splotch of dried blood crusted on the crotch of his jeans.

He was in a trash-strewn alleyway somewhere, in a decrepit neighborhood downtown. The street was eerily silent except for distant music blasting from an open window a few blocks down; its thudding beat reverberated dully inside his throbbing brain like a death knell. He swatted at the flies buzzing lazily around the puddle of piss he was still sitting in. A shattered bottle of Crown Royal lay at his feet, its cracked surface glinting slivers of sun so blinding that when he shut his eyes, he saw their ghostly afterimages etched into the backs of his eyelids like jagged scars.

He rubbed his eyes some more and looked around for his cigarettes. He found the pack in the mouth of a storm drain, soggy with piss. There were three left. He plucked one from the pack and put it in his mouth only to realize he’d lost his lighter the night before.

“God damn it,” he said aloud, and wished he hadn’t. Those three words echoed sadly off the graffiti-splattered alley walls, settling in the dense summer silence like an aborted prayer. The echo grew distorted and faded into silence; it seemed to carry with it every ounce of his despair.

Chris dug in his pockets for his cell phone, the cigarette hanging limply from his mouth like a dead worm. It was 1:30; more than enough time to grab a shower and a cup of coffee before his CytoCheck appointment. And buy some more cigarettes, of course. That was paramount.

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An hour later he sat trembling in the packed CytoCheck waiting room, his hangover flowing and ebbing and flowing again like a sadistic tidal wave. The CytoCheck had been converted from a gas station years ago, but it still *smelled* like gas, the residue of long-dead things dug up and burned to cause more death. He inhaled deeply, relishing the heady, carcinogenic scent that was somehow alluring despite its known toxicity, like the siren suckle of a menthol cigarette, or a refreshing glug of diet soda.

There was a kind of magic to that evil truth: that the things you love most are the most dangerous things, and they never fully take their leave. The lover who betrayed you might be dead for years, but their memory will haunt you relentlessly if you let it. Likewise, the ghosts of industry were pervasive. The COTE (Cancer on the Earth) fanatics could suicide-bomb every factory on the planet and still have no hope of scrubbing it clean, not ever. Not when radiation zones could last a million

years, and the topsoil might not rebound for millennia; not when toxicity was *fused* into the earth's ecosystems, coalesced insidiously into the water and air and soil, metastasized beyond repair.

Chris glanced nervously at the digital clock above the entrance, carefully avoiding eye contact with the other patients. He knew the eyes that would stare back at him, sullen windows to defeated souls peering out of sunken, Technicolor flesh. Below the clock, a banner proclaimed in proud, rainbow-colored letters: **CHERISH THE TIME YOU HAVE LEFT**. This was likely intended as an invitation, but read more like a command.

He tried to ignore the sounds of sickness surrounding him; the rhythmic coughing and retching and strained breathing creeping in from all sides, making him want to scream. Through the dull haze of his hangover, he struggled to remember the events of the previous night. They came to him in blurred flashes, like a series of photographs snapped by drunken children: the party and the tears, the failed attempt at consolation. Bitter resignation smoothed over by the next shot of whiskey. And the next one and the next, until at some point he must have tried to stumble home and ended up kissing pavement instead.

Whose house had it been? Likely one of Syd's friends – sure, one of those rotting Victorian deals the Nihils loved to squat in. Not that Syd's friends - or any of Chris's crowd - were Nihils; even if you *did* happen to find one that was halfway cool, there was no use getting to know them. They treated suicide like a game. Not that Chris blamed them much; the Big C freaked him out, too. Despite being fed a constant stream of propaganda for the past nineteen years (still a good six below the average expiration date), he was still ignorant as to the actual mechanics of the disease, and so it contained for him, despite its daily reality, a quasi-mystical dimension. It was far easier to fear what you didn't understand.

He understood that cancer was uncontrolled cell growth, but he couldn't tell you how chemotherapy worked (the "red devil" he injected every month or so to keep up appearances was really just saline and food coloring), or the latest targeted gene therapies, or the newer strategies either, the micro-rays and psyla-pulses, or any of the remedies on the opposite end of the spectrum: the vast homeopathic array of phytoplankton poultices and smoke lodge cleanses, all that hippie-dippie bullshit...in the end, the human body was just so much meat, and cancer – paint your skin any color, people! – was only rot contaminating said meat. Aimee understood that; she'd accepted that blunt reality without denying her own reason to live, to persist, which was partly why he loved her so much.

But, last night...he almost wished he didn't remember.

It had been the usual Tuesday night rager, complete with the usual cast and the usual substances. Syd had supplied the booze, Greg hauled a briefcase full of coke and pills, and the twins, Luke and Carmen, had brought a quarter-ounce of weed. The music was blasting, the liquor flowing, the smoke gagging, the collective high soothing in its encompassing cloud of numbed-out, *laissez-faire* euphoria.

Most of them were visibly showing, but they'd covered their tracks well. Even Aimee had been feeling good for the first time in ages. So good, in fact, that she'd had the audacity to reach for Chris's crotch as they lounged together in the bedbug-

riddled Goodwill armchair opposite the television. The TV was blaring livestream footage of the DC riots, hordes of undead protesters spilling out into the streets like a busted open bag of Skittles, their dyed clothes and painted skin signifying what type of C they had. Red meant colon, gray brain, fuchsia lung, pink breast and so on, until the colors became paint sample-detailed; Crayola specific.

But none of them wore their colors that night - that was the whole point. That was why they hosted these parties. For a few hours, they could be normal young people again, instead of the prematurely enfeebled. So with rising apprehension mingled with arousal, Chris had kissed Aimee on the neck as she continued to grope him, ignoring her clammy skin, focused intently on the cloying, rain-on-flowers scent of her perfume. He ran his hands over the smooth flesh of her bald head, sucking gently on her earlobes. Her purring moan became a guttural cough, which she just barely managed to stifle.

"Come on, babe," she whispered huskily, pulling Chris to his feet and guiding him out towards the patio. "No one will notice."

No one did; their friends were too blissfully stoned or drunk or faded on any galaxy of pills to care. Pills were all the rage; the hottest shit was a bootleg Japanese concoction of dopamine boosters still in its trial phase (you could get anything off the internet), which they'd dubbed "Fuckitall." Aimee had turned them on to its potential; they were each coasting on half a pill tonight, 300 milligrams of blissful, floaty-brained escape.

Aimee had his jeans off in seconds, her hands pulling him free a little too frantically, but Chris wasn't complaining. This was the most action he'd had in weeks. His high was so warm, so protective, pleasantly blended with his creeping liquor buzz. He was about to light a cigarette when Aimee seemed to hesitate.

"You sure you're up for this?" she asked him, so sweetly it hurt. "I mean, is your head -"

"I'm fine, Aimes," he breathed, smiling despite his shame, which fell over him suddenly like a shadow on a summer's day. "I'm really okay. My head's been feeling great tonight. I should be asking if *you're* up for this, really." He tried to laugh but froze at Aimee's crestfallen expression, the familiar pain rising in her eyes like plumes of oil in a polluted sea.

"I *want* this," she said, almost desperately, and Chris moaned as she began to nibble gently on his swollen flesh. "I want *you*." Electric waves of pleasure tingled through him, tightening, intensifying. She consumed him. After only a couple of minutes, he felt his knees begin to buckle, and didn't have time to warn her before his climax came on strongly, pathetically sudden - and Aimee held on, clinging to him fiercely, as though she meant to squeeze the soul out from his flesh.

Chris closed his eyes and sighed contentedly. He lit his cigarette as Aimee released her grasp, planting little kisses on his stomach before gazing up at him.

He opened his eyes and screamed.

"What?" Aimee exclaimed. "What is it?"

Then she saw it herself, glistening darkly on his softening manhood, staining the crotch of his jeans. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand, horrified. Her mouth was covered with thick, syrupy blood that shone black as motor oil in the dim patio lamplight. Her lips dripped steadily onto the tiled floor.

Chris pulled his pants up, afraid to look Aimee in the eyes. He snuffed out his cigarette on the wall, his hands shaking. The chatter from inside had ominously ceased; he felt his stomach hollow and queasily roll over like a bag of water falling through air.

"I – I'm sorry," Aimee stammered, using her sleeve to wipe more blood off her lips. "I really thought I was going to be okay tonight...Jesus, maybe it was that tequila earlier. Oh, God – I - *uergh!*" She gagged, then throatily hocked up what looked to Chris like a chunk of lung. She ran past him, mortified, into the house.

They turned to stare as he followed after her, Syd half-frowning, Greg smiling unaware as he snorted another line of coke off the cracked glass tabletop. The twins looked up at him wide-eyed from the couch, nervously fiddling with the tips of the plastic IV tubes that snaked secretively from their shirtsleeves. Their identical eyes were like those of holocaust victims: mournful but remote, resigned to suffering.

Chris pounded on the bathroom door. He could hear Aimee in there retching. The water was running; she was trying to muffle the sounds of her sickness.

"Don't worry about it," he called through the door. "Let's catch a 'bus and go back to my place, okay? Watch a movie or something?"

Aimee mumbled something unintelligible that was washed out by the running water.

"*What?*"

She groaned, and Chris heard the lock click. She was leaning over the toilet, drooling strands of bloody saliva into the bowl with a series of sickening *plops*, her carefully concealed agony exposed to him at last, her mask of salubrity fully slipped. He fought back tears; he even tried to smile.

She flushed the toilet and turned to face him. Chris lit another cigarette. He waited.

"I'm just...I'm sorry we haven't had sex in so long," Aimee said finally, pathetically.

Chris sighed and dragged roughly on his cigarette, exhaling a plume of noxious smoke that drifted upwards to be absorbed by the greater cloud of smoke hovering in their midst. "Don't be, babe. You're sick."

"*We're sick,*" she corrected him, frowning. He couldn't stop thinking how pale she looked, how cruelly, dangerously drained. "Only this kind of thing never seems to happen to *you*, does it, Chris?"

"Honey," he said, with a ghost of his usual smile, "I could be on *life support* and still try and find a way to have sex with you." He slid an arm around her waist, but she twisted out of his grasp.

"Chris," she said coldly, "I'm dying. You know I am. We all are. But – God, sometimes I don't think you're even *sick!* Not like the rest of us, man. You take your meds, you have your migraine episodes, but you don't *show* it. You just *don't*. I used to think, 'oh, maybe he's just that strong - maybe he's braver than everyone else. Maybe he's found a way to hide it, to make us feel like it'll be all right, like *I'll* be all right'..." He saw her exasperation, her quiet fury manifesting into tears.

"Aimee," he said, pleading. He was struggling not to cry too. "Please, baby, we don't have to talk about it. We don't have to talk about anything tonight. We'll do

whatever you want, whatever you need. I love you, Aimes. I love you so much it *hurts*, I swear to you. So can't we just... 'fuck it all,' you know?"

She stood there staring at him, her eyes glistening pools of fathomless misery. A trickle of blood slid slowly down her chin. "I love you too, Chris, you know I do. But I can't. I just can't be around you right now. I'm sorry." And without another word, she stormed past him into the hallway, ignoring his frantic pleas to stay. He flinched at the sound of the front door slamming.

He wanted to follow her, but of course he couldn't; that was the only rule of their get-togethers. Crowley's revelation: 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.' You were free to do whatever you pleased so long as you didn't get in anyone's way. The cruelest thing a person could do was to waste someone else's time, when time was so severely limited.

So Chris had walked back into the kitchen, mixed himself a strong whiskey and coke, and joined the others in the living room. The TV had switched livestreams from the DC riots to a COTE demonstration in San Francisco. A veritable army of naked, rainbow-skinned hipsters was throwing carts of processed food and Monsanto-grown vegetables off the Golden Gate Bridge. The scene was ludicrous, but none of them was really watching it.

The mood had changed with Aimee gone. Chris sank into the couch, listening idly to the others talk about various drug potencies and popular TV shows. He swallowed his drink without tasting it.

"Hey, take it easy, man," Syd slurred from the end of the couch, smiling drunkenly over at Chris. "Forget about that girl awhile, you know?"

Chris sighed, and lit another cigarette.

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He'd fallen for Aimee the second he saw her, sitting alone in the back of their college cafeteria with a copy of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* in one hand and a water bottle full of some unknown dark liquor in the other. This was only last year, but it felt like decades ago to Chris.

She was very pretty, in the fashionable cancer-chic kind of way (the look was so in vogue by then that younger girls who weren't even sick yet would go to great lengths to mimic it), with sunken eyes and an almost elderly delicacy, her skin so pale it was nearly translucent. She was beautifully bald, so strikingly that he couldn't imagine her with hair or a wig. But what had attracted him most was her other color, the one she wore.

She was dressed head to toe in all-consuming black: an embroidered black gown, black mourner's veil, black skull earrings dangling from her ears. The newly widowed look that even widows no longer wore, since funerals had changed so much. Like check-ups and hospital visits, they had become sanitized operations, castrated of emotion; you attended a funeral with the same expectations you had going to a car wash, or getting a haircut.

"You really don't give a damn, do you?" Chris asked the girl by way of introduction. He stood grinning at her, transfixed.

He'd worn his hair long then, and Aimee told him later she'd thought he was just some hippie, maybe a COTE inductee. For a second he thought maybe he'd offended her, but then she'd laughed. He'd thought the sound much too mirthful for her kind of creature.

"No, I really don't," she said, with a devious smile.

He walked over to her. "Mind if I join you?" He pulled up a chair without waiting for an answer. Aimee lifted her veil, draping the length of it down her hairless head like some kind of B-movie villain, analyzing him.

The whole cancer-color thing had been fairly novel by then (no one had taken to body painting yet), but was growing in popularity. The campus was already littered with sickly students dressed in greens and yellows and pinks; already the color you wore became a symbol of pride. You wore your color defensively, as if to *own* your sickness, to cement its symptoms into the foundation of your character. There were those who surrounded themselves exclusively with members of their color, who ranked various hues in a kind of hierarchy of disease. Yet although no one said it outright, black was taboo; black wasn't a color at all, but an ominous shade. The Nihilists had claimed black as their sigil; black meant apathy, and despair.

Chris was dressed all in gray, but unbeknownst to Aimee, he'd only donned his color since the start of the semester. The idea of faking it had been an aesthetic choice then, a comfort mechanism. He'd chosen to do so to set people at ease, not out of an urge to *be* one of them.

"What stage are you?" the girl asked, and then added almost as an afterthought, "I'm Aimee, by the way."

"Two," he'd said. Two seemed safe. "I'm Chris."

"Four. Diagnosed last April. Fuck it all, right?"

"Right."

"No." She extracted a tiny plastic bottle from her clutch and popped two yellow pills in her mouth. "*Fuckitall.*" She grinned. "Normally, now is when we'd ask each other about our respective majors and future plans or whatever." She leaned in close to Chris over the table and winked. "Or we could just get right to it, Mr. Stage Two Brain. Tell me, can you feel your tumor pressing against your gray matter, distracting you from your studies?"

Chris wasn't offended by her callousness; he wouldn't have been even if he'd *had* cancer. Instead, he appreciated her frankness, her bitter humor. It was refreshing after the year of denial he'd had to endure when his mother was sick, all her painful, forced smiles and naïve optimism occluding any opportunity to honestly, openly *suffer*, so that even now she seemed to haunt him. He could almost hear her, chuckling, '*oh I could never die Chris. In fact, I feel just fine!*'

"So far so good," he told the black girl brightly. "But to be honest, I don't see much point in going to college."

"Yeah, me neither," she agreed. "Except my parents paid for it before they died, so I felt obligated to give it a go. Until I get too sick, I guess. What about you?"

"Well, I got a scholarship, so –"

"No, I mean, what about your parents?"

"What about them?"

He stared at her for a long moment, trying to determine exactly how drained her well of sympathy might be by now, how much feeling she actually had left.

"My mom died three years ago," he said. "My dad was diagnosed last week. Stage three." This wasn't a lie. His mother had died horrifically slowly, in grit-toothed pain; his father, meanwhile, had simply woken one day with a slight throbbing in his jaw, which had quickly blossomed into...

"So now I'd like to know something else," the girl said gravely. "The 'what do you want to do after you graduate?' kind of question."

"Oh. Okay."

"Except, you know what I'm really asking."

Chris thought about it for a moment, and then said, "What do I *want* to happen, or what do I *believe* happens?"

"Believe."

He shrugged. "I don't believe it really matters, because we won't remember it. Whatever happens is *going* to happen, you know?"

His answer seemed not just to satisfy, but stimulate her. Aimee tilted her head up slightly, her eyes hopelessly alive. "So what's your take on The Man Upstairs?"

Chris scratched his chin in thought. "I like the idea of God being, like, the energetic field that unites all living things. Or maybe just the guiding principle behind natural forces...I don't know."

She stared at him. "Tell me more. This is all I can think about."

"Well," he continued, "what I really think is, *that* doesn't matter, either. God has nothing to do with this epidemic. We did this to ourselves."

Aimee smiled then - a smile bright enough to ward off death, he'd thought. The idea of that brilliant luminosity simply blinking out of existence was next to impossible; you might as well try shutting off the sun.

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He was roused from memory by the call of the CytoCheck automated attendant. "Patient #218767," the sexless voice announced. "Lowery, Christopher."

Chris got up and walked toward one of the curtained-off consultation stalls at the rear of the building. The light above the room flashed a sickly green; below it, his patient ID scrolled by on a digital ticker. He entered the stall, his heart pounding. The curtains were painted a deep blue to help keep patients calm as they received their diagnoses. He stripped naked, his hands shaking slightly as they undid the buttons on his piss-stained over-shirt. The cold tiled floor made him shiver.

He sat on a steel stool facing the CytoCheck docbot, a chrome-plated, cube-shaped robot with a tentacle-like appendage sprouted from its center. Fixed on the end of this appendage was a retractable, spheroid camera eye. This eye was currently glowing red, peering at Chris with inhuman intensity, subtly widening its infrared iris as it scanned his internal organs for signs of illness.

After a minute or so, the docbot emitted a satisfied beep, and its appendage retracted smoothly back into its body. A flexible metal tentacle emerged in its place, armed with a long, needle-tipped syringe. It slithered toward Chris's thigh with pre-programmed purpose. He felt his skin prickle even before the needle made contact,

wincing as it slid in and out of his vein as quickly as a scorpion's sting. He watched his blood siphon into the vial, letting loose a shaky sigh as it vanished back into the docbot.

The voice came from internal speakers inside its metallic body; all docbots had the same strategically designed, soothingly maternal voice. It seemed as artificially empathetic as any flesh-and-blood doctor; of course, you had to have a great deal of money to afford one of *those*.

"Christopher Lowery, Caucasian male, aged nineteen," the docbot said. "I'm pleased to say I have good news. Your blood tests from last week all came back normal; no detectable signs of cancer. However, I strongly advise that you stop smoking, and limit yourself to one alcoholic drink per day at the maximum."

Chris said nothing. He knew this was typically when you were supposed to cry with relief, or pray to God, or something equally useless.

"Your check-up fee has been automatically deducted from your account," the docbot continued pleasantly. "Please report here next month to discuss the results of this afternoon's test. Have a healthy day!" The machine seemed to shut down, and then he heard a low, mechanical whirring from within, as if it had forgotten something. "And *please* quit smoking already, Chris."

Chris gave a short, bitter laugh, trying not to think how much its tone reminded him of his mother.

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He stood on the corner outside the CytoCheck, alternately deep breathing cigarette smoke and the smog-infested air. Across from the CytoCheck, an ancient factory of some kind was pumping forth thick plumes of smoke from its hulking, phallic smokestacks. The factory was horrifying in its immensity, a mess of rusted steel and rickety ladders, indomitable amongst a backdrop of urban blight. He felt certain it would still be there, farting out its billowy black poison, long after he was gone.

He stared at the huge plasma screen towering above the CytoCheck, which was running an ad for one of the new Death Centers cropping up in the area. Looped on the screen was a series of heartbreaking familial vignettes: a father weeping as he euthanized his sleeping five-year old daughter with a lethal kiss, in a facsimile of her princess-themed bedroom; a grown-up version of the same girl euthanizing her now-middle-aged father with the same kiss while he watched the game from his favorite armchair; a husband making love to his wife with a toxic condom; the inverted perspective of the wife as she experienced the throws of her orgasm and inward rushing death, crying from ecstasy and rapturous submission. *Give the one you love the gift of Release*, ran the slogan at the bottom of the screen.

The ad made Chris think of his father, who was rotting away from lymphatic cancer in a posh health center upstate. He hadn't paid him a visit in nearly six months. That last visit, Stephen Lowery had been gravely disappointed with his son for dropping out of school, but that wasn't what kept Chris from visiting. His dad had been practically begging to go to a Death Center upstate, but admission had to be mutually agreed upon by both patient and next of kin. And just as his mother would have failed to rise to that occasion (or even acknowledge it as an option), Chris

couldn't bring himself to, either. Losing his mother, after seeing her fight so hard until her bitter, wide-eyed end, had been maddening enough.

He ambled along the crumbling sidewalk in search of a public electro-bus. He tried Aimee's cell, but it went straight to voicemail; either her phone was dead or she was blocking his calls. He wondered, not for the first time, how she would react if he told her the truth. How much she might despise him.

He wondered where Aimee was now. Neither one of them had jobs; part of their pact in quitting school involved shunning work as well, which they viewed as a waste of existence. Thankfully, they each had enough inheritance money left to support their decision. That money had dwindled steadily over the past few months, but neither of them had felt any pressure to adapt. Their lives were lived day-to-day, party-to-party; nearly everyone in their age group had entered some version of late-life crisis at the ripe old age of twenty.

Aimee was probably at her apartment, a ratty bungalow she'd inherited from her mom, sleeping off the dregs of last night's ugliness. Or she might be in the company of her terminal friends - Stacy, or that Gwen girl. Probably eating ice cream and talking about him and their fight last night. Her girlfriends loved any drama that took the focus off the only drama that really mattered, which was their imminent deaths.

But as it turned out, Aimee had never gone home. Her bike wasn't locked up on the porch, and her place looked desolate. Nonetheless Chris pounded on her door for a full minute, puffing on cigarette after cigarette until there was a small pile of butts littered on the doorstep, and he thought he might faint from light-headedness. By that time, a few of Aimee's neighbors were watching him from their windows, their faces drawn and worried and old, like mummies disturbed from a thousand-year slumber. It was almost sundown, and Chris wanted to be off the streets by nightfall. The night attracted ragged gangs of dying thieves, many of them Nihils, who'd slit your throat for a bottle of meds.

Stacy picked up on the third ring. She sounded impossibly weak, and he had to strain to hear her over the fuzzed reception. "Yeah? Who is this?"

"Chris, Aimee's boyfriend. We met at that house party at Gretchen Well's place a couple months ago?"

Stacy sniffed into the phone; she sounded like she was trying hard not to sob.

"Yeah, I remember you. How's Gretchen these days?"

"Dead," Chris replied. "Listen, have you heard from Aimee today by any chance?"

Dead silence; for a minute he thought maybe she'd hung up on him, but then she said in a flat, emotionless voice that made his pulse spike and his blood chill, "You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

Again that terrible sniffing. "Hear *what?*" he repeated impatiently.

"Aimee's in the mini-hospital on Glenbrook, Chris. She went septic this morning."

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The tiny yellow indicator light on the life support machine flashed in intermittent synchronization with her pulse, twinkling in and out of existence like a fading, but persistent star. Aimee's coma had been induced shortly before he arrived; he'd had to push his way through an army of docbots and shambling cancer zombies too sick for their colors anymore (except the final color, which was ash grey) to find her.

Aimee's room was a cement-walled, Spartan cell. Hospitals were like prisons these days, crammed to the gills with patients who checked in to fight and lose their futile battles, to stall, to wither, to undergo machine-performed surgeries guided by a sole human overseer whose initial guise was like that of a symphony conductor but in actuality was closer to that of an assembly line foreman, or butcher: severing flesh from bone, extracting tumor after tumor like so many pounds of raw meat. *Cut it out, measure it, collect your fee. Next customer.*

Chris watched Aimee lying there tied to her cot by a web of tubes like a fly caught in a spider's web, only without the struggle. She looked to him like Sleeping Beauty's bare-headed specter, silhouetted ethereally by the sun setting through the barred window behind her, dozing without awareness in the shadowy void between life and death. He watched her chest rise and fall beneath the thin hospital sheets, like mortal waves cresting slowly into stillness. He studied her emaciated face glistening with sweat beneath the harsh fluorescent lights, savoring the acrid, sanitized hospital smell pervading her cell, straining to grasp these last few moments with her even as they slipped from him like water through a fatally cracked glass, leaking steadily away despite the illusion of permanence. It was impossible to slow down time, to hold onto anything.

"I'm so sorry, Aimee," he whispered hoarsely. His eyes were raw and tear-stung. He was infinitely grateful that the NurseAid, a nursing machine with retractable latex-gloved hands, had seen fit to close Aimee's eyes. It spared him the knowledge of whether or not she'd be able to truly *see* him. How deep was her coma, he wondered; did she know he was here with her? Could she feel his presence?

He wished he could have kissed her, but the umbilical tubing that supplied her oxygen ran from her mouth into the life support machine. Instead he placed his hand upon her breast, hotly alive beneath the thin fabric, and felt for her heartbeat. It proved difficult to isolate with all the ambient hospital noise, the endless beeping and clicking and whirring of machinery, the distant murmurs of the docbots and echoing moans of their delirious, dying, infantile patients. Everywhere, in all directions, they screamed and sobbed and were hushed and soothed and medicated into submission, like pouty children rocked into their final cradle, whose deadly womb promised release and forever sleep.

He was still looking for her pulse when the docbots wheeled into the room to turn her life support off. This latest visit had sapped Aimee's already depleted account. In the end, it seemed, the ride was only really ever over when your money ran out.

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It took him a week to make up his mind; maybe his mind had already been made, but he still needed time to collect himself. A week was more than enough time to grieve, because time so moved fast these days. In that week, the Nihils set to burning down museums across the world, slashing the Mona Lisa to shreds and toppling ancient Roman sculptures, decimating priceless artifacts, because, they decreed, they no longer mattered. In that week, three million children died; in that week, suicides quadrupled nationwide. People got sick, died, and kept on chugging. There was little else for them to do.

When he could no longer ignore the impulse, Chris took a public electro-buses down to the health center where his father lived. When he saw his son, he beckoned Chris in for a tight hug, despite the months of silence that lay between them, ruffling Chris's hair like he used to do when he was a child.

Stephen Lowery looked like he had aged twenty years since Chris had seen him last. His once-domineering frame was frail and hunched, collapsed into the wheelchair that claimed his body; his head was bald and liver-spotted, and below his chin, his withered neck was lumpy with veined, egg-like tumors. Only his eyes were untouched by the illness that eroded him; they were bright blue and strangely clear, almost youthful in their focus.

Chris wheeled his father out onto the verandah, where they sat at one of the dining tables, watching the more mobile patients lounging on deck chairs and talking amongst themselves. Some were even playing croquet, if pathetically. The 'health center' was effectively a luxurious hospice; part of the reason Chris had ignored his father's pleading for so long was because he couldn't grasp, until now, how truly superficial it all was. Beneath the pristine veneer of order and affluence, the same brutal reality awaited them all.

In halted, measured tones, Chris related to his dad the events of the last few months.

"I'm sorry to hear about Aimee," his father said kindly, when he was finished. "She was a wonderful girl, Chris." His gaze was mournful, yet surreally calm, the sad, sure affectation of a man who's lived through more than perhaps he'd imagined, or wanted.

"Do you think she'd hate me for what I did?" Chris asked. He needed suddenly, badly, to know. "For lying to her?" Here he was sitting across from his dying, wheelchair-bound father, whom they both knew yearned for something only Chris could grant - yet *he* was the one who sounded desperate.

His father remained infinitely serene; his speech bore the contemplative grace of a sage or a Buddha, of someone whose mind has moved patiently beyond the nagging constraints of the physical vessel.

"No," his father said reassuringly, "I don't think that girl could ever have hated you. And you shouldn't beat yourself up about pretending to be sick, either. What you should be asking yourself, son, are the questions that really *matter*: would your being sick have changed the way you felt about Aimee? Did you ever stop loving for her, caring for her? Did you abandon her when her sickness got too difficult to manage, or when she broke down from her pain, and her sorrow? Did you avoid her? Did you lead her on? Did you ever hold anything she did, or said, against her? Did you ever do these things?"

“No,” Chris said at once, because it was true; his love for Aimee had been a blight against the cruel jungle of her disease. There was nothing he had ever felt for her but hopeless, unfathomable love so deep and blue he could have drowned in it, willingly, a thousand times over. “But, Dad –”

“Then nothing else matters,” his father interrupted, smiling softly. “You just need to forgive yourself, that’s all, Chris. It’s far too heavy a weight, and much too fleeting a season to carry any baggage you don’t need. Okay?”

“But –”

“Okay?”

The smile hardened slightly, and Chris sighed. “Okay.”

One of the nurses (living, breathing people worked at the health center alongside bots, a luxury which his dad, a veteran ad executive, could well afford) came over to bring them lunch and his father’s mid-day chemo treatment.

Chris munched thoughtfully on his portion of veggie bacon as the nurse, a rail-thin girl who looked half-dead herself, carefully inserted the IV into his father’s bioport. A bright, blood red liquid seeped steadily from the chemo bag down the clear tubing that wound into his father’s body. Watching it, Chris was reminded of Aimee lying in her hospital cot, and had to look away.

Off in the distance, beyond the low-lying hills that surrounded the health center, a black pillar of smoke billowed insistently into the placid, late-summer sky. Probably one of the museum fires, Chris realized. From his vantage point it looked like some sort of biblical omen, like a sacrificial offering. He thought back to the religion class he took last year, recalling the Greek roots of the word ‘holocaust’: literally, *whole burning*. Humanity was in the midst of a holocaust, he knew, perhaps the final go-around. For the first time that day, Chris found himself reaching for a cigarette. The habit seemed pointless, now that Aimee was gone; no use in hastening the inevitable. But it was hopeless trying to quit. He was addicted.

“I really wish you wouldn’t,” his father said mildly, watching him. The nurse had wandered off to attend to the other patients.

Chris hastily stashed the cigarette. “Sorry.” He forced himself to look at his father, to accept the dark reality of the alien tube feeding him poison which his body so readily accepted, drank down clean as mother’s milk.

“Look,” Chris said determinedly, “the real reason I came is because of the Death Center. Dad, is that...is that still what you want?”

A subtle wave of energy washed over his father’s features; the benevolent eyes darkened slightly, keen with purpose. It was a very slight change, but Chris recognized it just the same. He’d seen that look a thousand times; he’d seen it when he was five years old and his dad came home from work one night to find Chris crying in his mother’s arms, his thumb badly dislocated after tumbling down the basement stairs; he’d seen it when his mother was first diagnosed, and again when his father himself was diagnosed; he’d seen it half a year ago when he’d announced that he was dropping out of school. The same measured, calm focus which spoke simultaneously to restraint and intensity.

“Yes,” his father said. “Of course I do. I’m in tremendous pain, Chris.”

“Your nurse said you’re responding well to treatment,” Chris said stubbornly, precisely the way his mother would have.

"I don't just mean *physical* pain," his father told him, and his smile seemed suddenly more like a grimace. Chris thought about the immutability of loss, and the inevitability of death; he thought about Aimee dressed all in black and the book she'd been reading that day, which he'd read twice since then and was re-reading now. And as he thought, he felt himself begin to smile, too.

"Okay," he said. "I'll sign the consent form. And I'll be with you for...for your release. Maybe I'll even do it myself." He hesitated, still thinking of Aimee. "But I want to know, Dad, I don't think you've ever told me. I know I haven't asked you..." He took a deep breath.

"What do you think happens when you die?"

Stephen Lowery studied his son for a long, tranquil moment, looking pleased but not at all surprised, as though he'd anticipated this question the moment Chris had arrived.

"I'd like to think the eastern religions had it right," his dad said ponderously. "The Hindus and Buddhists. I'd like to think the energy which makes up my residual consciousness – my spirit, if there is such a thing – will be sent back into the world as a butterfly, in search of the flower who was your mother." He gave a withering sigh. "But I don't know, Chris. All I know is that death means letting go. And that's enough for me to want it."

Chris nodded in understanding. They sat in silence as one of the nurses came to clear their trays, and then Chris raised his eyebrows cleverly and said, "So you want to be a butterfly, huh?"

And for the first time since before his mother got sick, he heard his father laugh.

...

The aquamarine woman (was aquamarine ovarian or peritoneal? Chris couldn't remember) was screaming her lungs out in the middle of the CytoCheck waiting room, putting on a crazed matinee for anyone who cared to watch.

"It's a hoax!" she was screaming. "I tell you, it's all a fucking *hoax!*"

The seven-foot tall steel-plated security bots were already on the move, calmly beseeching the woman to desist even as they raised their deaf-wave tasers and twitching, metal claws in warning. "Please remain calm and come with us, ma'am," the nearest of the bots intoned in a reasonable yet firm male voice.

The woman swung her purse at the bots with a crazed war whoop. Her chrome-aquamarine wig went flying into the crowd; her massive, aquamarine-painted tits bounced happily inside her aquamarine-dyed tube top. "Don't you understand, you *sheep!* They *want* us sick, it's just a *business* to them! That's how the health companies make their money, don't you see! They poison the food, they poison the air and the soil and the water supply - it's all public knowledge! Don't you see, it's all just part of their game, and all we have to do is to - "

The woman's desperate screeching fell instantly mute as the bots zapped her with their tasers; at the same time, two of them grabbed her roughly by the waist and hoisted her in the air. They hauled her motionless out of the CytoCheck, and the crowd of patients watched her go, numb in their sickness, thoroughly unperturbed.

A sallow-skinned teenage girl, also decked out in aquamarine threads, shook her painted head in shame. She grinned sheepishly at the patients sitting beside her, thoroughly embarrassed by the woman's behavior.

"Patient #218767," announced the sexless voice of the automated attendant. "Lowery, Christopher."

Chris walked past the rows of stunned patients into the consultation stall at the rear of the building, his mind a complete blank. He'd been up drinking and chain-smoking at Syd's all night, and wanted to get this over with as soon as possible, so he could rest a bit and get right back to it.

He ripped off his clothes and threw them haphazardly in the corner, waiting for the docbot to do its thing. He closed his eyes, shivering, as the tentacled red eye scanned his body. After it beeped in approval, Chris began pulling on his clothes, cringing in anticipation of the needle. But, strangely, the docbot's appendage stayed put in its body. Chris thought maybe it had stalled – that happened sometimes – and felt an urge to give the thing a sharp kick in its side.

"Christopher Lowery, Caucasian male, aged nineteen," the machine intoned with a note of cautious sympathy sewn into its maternal inflection. "I'm sad to say I do not have good news for you this afternoon. Routine scanning has detected a small, malignant tumor located in the middle lobe of your left lung. Unfortunately, my scan confirms the presence of abnormal cells found in your blood sample taken from our previous appointment. Cancer cells were also present in your lower tracheal; initial readings would suggest a secondary stage of preemptive metastasis."

The docbot fell silent for what felt like the longest second of Chris's nineteen years of existence.

"I do apologize for the news, Chris," the docbot continued emphatically, "but I *did* warn you *repeatedly* to quit smoking." It paused dramatically, as if to make a point, and then continued pleasantly, "Your check-up fee has been automatically deducted from your – "

He kicked the docbot squarely in its red, cyclopic eye. The machine spun around on its base and whirred defensively; simultaneously, the green light above the consultation booth flashed red, and a shrill alarm sounded from the docbot's speakers. But Chris was already halfway out the door, his jeans pulled up tightly around his waist, ignoring the security bots shouting at him from the end of the hall and the long rows of cancer-stricken faces with their hollow, wandering eyes following him, piercing him, begging him wordlessly for answers which no one could ever give, for there were none.

...

He collapsed onto an old wooden bench outside the CytoCheck, his head swirling with fear and regret and cold, black humor. At the forefront of his mind, strangely enough, wasn't Aimee or his parents, but the ironic reality of his bedroom closet, and its shelves of gray: gray hoodies, gray shirts, gray socks and boxers and hats and jeans and jackets...He laughed out loud, not bitter laughter, but a deep, racking belly laughter that made his sides ache and passers-by shuffle along a little

faster. Imagining himself in fuchsia-colored clothes was just too much, man. Forget about it.

Chris wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes and glanced up thoughtfully at the indomitable cerulean sky. It occurred to him then that some things in life were immortal, were deathless. How billions of little monkey-like beings such as himself had lived out their entire little lives crawling and laughing and working and fucking and crying and dying all over the planet for countless generations, beneath that same imperious sky, through which the sun now peered benignly from a bank of sailing cirrus clouds to flash its golden rays onto the world.

It was a particularly beautiful day, Chris thought.
He sighed, and lit a cigarette.