

Breathless

Jack studied the wall-mounted diagram where every lobe, vein, and bronchus was rendered in pink. Healthy lungs. Not Tina's lungs. He traced a route along the examination room's perimeter for the umpteenth time while they waited for the pulmonologist.

"Stop. You're making me nervous," his wife said.

"Sorry. It'll be okay."

Same as the family doctor had said. Anxiety and asthma had tag-teamed an assault since childhood, each affliction gut punching the air out of her at will. So, when the doctor tapped a succession of perfunctory *NOs* on his tablet – no smoking, no history of serious illness, no fever, no pain, no nothing – he shooed her away with Prozac and an inhaler. Months later when Tina started hacking up globs of bloody phlegm, the doctor finally decided it might be a problem. A chest x-ray and biopsy confirmed the cancer. Today's meeting would determine if it were treatable. Jack caught his reflection in the glass frame. Tiny red cracks stenciled his eyeballs as if they had been smashed and glued back together. His entire face sagged under the weight of watching his wife deteriorate. He sat and took her hand. His fingers traced along a purple splotch that rippled out from an old IV stick. "We'll get through this."

She leaned in and he put his arm around her. Please be fixable. The pulmonologist came in wearing a lab coat and a neutral expression honed from years of delivering sad news. How do doctors do it? Look someone in the eye and deliver their death sentence? The answer came soon enough. Jack reeled as if the prognosis physically assaulted him. His eardrums pounded in rhythm with his breath, muting the doctor's voice, muffling the phrase *less than a year left*. A chill crept through his body. He realized with sick irony that he with the perfect lungs was hyperventilating and on the verge of passing

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out. He squeezed, as much for stability as for love, and the form of his wife filled his arms, pressed against his chest. Her soft sobs snapped him out of his stupor.

Thankfully, the doctor hadn't led with a *good news-bad news* cliché, but there was a sliver of hope. While the cancer had ravaged Tina's lungs – no chance for chemo or radiation – it hadn't spread to other parts of the body. There was a long shot. Double lung transplant.

Jack didn't bother with his reading glasses. He knew the content by whether it came in a solid envelope (junk) or one with a transparent plastic strip (bill). Neither were acted upon. Sorting the mail was a ritual he performed between his day job and night job to de-clutter the kitchen, nothing more.

Tina streamed a show on her tablet while a humidifier puffed out clouds of vapor around her. What are you supposed to do when life's finish line is revealed? Do you keep running the race sorting mail and staring at a little screen relegating your final days to the mundane, or do you take a detour and live your remaining days tumbling out of airplanes and rafting the Yucatan? In the week following the pulmonologist visit, it had been the former. She had scheduled a visit with a transplant specialist, Doctor Williams, and until then the bucket-list would wait. Plus, they couldn't afford a bucket, could barely afford a teacup.

They shared a kiss and he left for the restaurant. Valet parking wasn't the most prestigious job but, aside from the fact that it pulled him away from Tina, he didn't mind the work.

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The regulars had earned nicknames courtesy of Chip, who had valeted since the restaurant opened. Elvis, Jabba, Guido, Ferrari Guy, Freckles, and Fucktard to name a few. He kissed ass when collecting keys and dished expletive-laden insults behind their vehicles' closed doors. It was an art form, and he was the master. His tips could fill a Mercedes-sized swear jar.

"Yo Jack. How's it going?"

Jack had been moonlighting since Tina had become too sick to work. He and Chip had hit it off instantly. On busy nights they parked cars. On slow nights they talked. "It's going."

"How's that pretty wife of yours? Any good news?"

Between parking cars, Jack told him about the latest doctor visit and money woes.

"That's fucked up, man. Good people like you can't afford a little R & R, while these douchebags show up in their hundred-thousand-dollar cars and eat their five-hundred-dollar dinners."

Jack pulled his jacket tighter and blew into his hands. "Yeah. Is what it is."

"Where do you think all their money comes from anyway?" He motioned to the parking lot.

"I don't know, probably doctors, lawyers, and CEOs."

"CEOs my ass," Chip said. "It's all trust fund money passing from generation to generation. You think these idiots have the smarts to make any real money?"

Jack shrugged.

"You ever think about spanking it in one of their cars? You know, after you parked it? Leave a nice souvenir on the Italian leather."

"Wow. I –"

"Oh shit. Salty coming through. You want to take her?"

Amid the docile BMWs, Range Rovers, and Teslas, a 1960s Shelby GT 350 muscle car roared onto the parking lot, its throaty exhaust startling one of the other vehicles to sound its alarm. Just below the twin racing stripes, the license plate read SALTY3.

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“Dumb as dirt that one,” Chip whispered. “Definitely a trust fund baby.”

“She’s like forty.”

“Everyone started out as a baby, right? And that car...two hundred fifty large. I looked it up.”

Jack reckoned he could take Tina on endless vacations with that kind of coin.

“Miss Salty,” Chip called through the open window as the car stopped. He opened the door for her. “My young padawan will be assisting you this fine evening.” Jack appreciated the gesture. She was their biggest tipper.

“Evening gentlemen,” she said as she climbed out. She wore black jeans with a cardigan and pumps. Underdressed for a five-star steakhouse but with a swagger that suggested she would wear whatever she damn wanted. “Does young padawan have a name?”

“Jack, ma’am. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, Jack. I’m Maris.” She extended her hand. One of the only customers to ever do so.

“Maris?” Chip said. “All this time —”

“It means *of the sea*. Did you think my parents named me Salty?”

Chip shrugged. “Mine named me Chip.”

Maris rolled her eyes. “Keys are in the car. Oh, and Jack? Any scratches and I’ll rip your balls off.”

Jack stopped in his tracks.

“She’s kidding,” Chip said. “I think.”

She held a frown for a moment and then broke into a grin. “Yeah, just fucking with you. But I did take a picture of the odometer.”

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Jack missed Tina's appointment with the transplant specialist courtesy of his two jobs. When he returned, Tina recited the two numbers the specialist had shared during her consultation: three and twenty-four. Three months to live; twenty-four months to get a pair of working lungs. The doctor didn't know what he was talking about, Jack said.

She, Tina corrected, knew what she was talking about. A host of web sites ranked her among the top thoracic surgeons in the world. Doctor Williams had performed hundreds of successful transplant surgeries. And the doctor did say the numbers were guesstimates based on statistics and algorithms. Think positive, she said when she gave Tina the organ transplant beeper. Over the next two weeks, they obtained a second and third opinion. The doctors agreed that Tina's condition was fixable if the organ were available.

One night after dinner, Tina doubled over in pain. In a panic, Jack took her to the ER. They sent her home with heavy narcotics to treat the pain that would accompany her to the end. Desperate, Jack turned to the internet where he confirmed most of what they already knew. However, he pulled on one thread that led to fresh territory. If they went to another country, they could reduce the wait to weeks instead of months. They would have to pay heavy fees (and bribes), but that's just how most of the world worked. This was not a black-market doctor wielding a rusty scalpel and leaving a victim in an icy bathtub. It was a qualified surgeon in a medical facility for those who could afford it. He and Tina could not. That was going to change.

Despite the chill, Jack peeled the shirt from his damp back as he steeled himself for what he was about to do. He had racked his brain for lawful solutions and found none.

"You seem distracted," Chip said.

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“Yeah, Tina’s not doing great. I might need to leave for a bit and check on her.” The first part was true. The second was not.

“Of course, man.” I’ve got you covered.

An hour later, SALTY3 thundered onto the lot. The car stopped and Jack held the door open. I can do this, he thought as he dabbed a sweaty palm on his pantleg. He parked the car and returned to the valet booth.

“Oh shit,” Jack made a show of shooting a worried look at his phone even though the text messages on the screen were old. “Tina said she’s vomiting. Gotta go.”

He jumped in his car and raced out of the lot. His house was left; he turned right. He skidded to a stop at the hardware store, rushed inside, and slapped Maris’s set of keys (housekey included) on the counter. Duplicates were a dollar-ninety-nine each.

“That was quick,” Chip said when he returned.

“False alarm,” Jack said. “Just dry heaving. She’s fine.”

Maris returned to the booth. Jack brought the car. His guilt spiked when she handed him a fifty-dollar tip. Victimless crime, he reassured himself. Just a drop in the bucket to the insurance company. When he got home, he mapped the street address he got from a snapshot of Maris’s car registration.

A week later, Jack called in sick. From his car, he watched Maris’s headlights sweep across a row of hedges and disappear down the street enroute to the restaurant. His heart thundered in his chest. For Tina. As he walked past the four-car garage he pulled a ski mask over his face and thin gloves over his fingers. He spared a backward glance. There were no people, but his Ford Festiva stood out against the backdrop of the neighbor’s columned entryway like a heap of junk on bulk trash collection day. He

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could've cased the house in advance to rule out dogs, kids, house cleaners, or even a husband in case Chip was wrong about her being single. Every advance action would have increased the chance that someone would see him and tie him to the burglary. In the end he went in cold. He was shaking as he approached the front door. The doorbell chimed. No answer. He inserted the first key. No luck. He inserted the second key. It turned. He held the door in place. Surely an alarm would shriek when the door opened. He took a deep breath and pulled. Nothing.

Jack stepped uninvited into someone else's home. The action surely crossed more lines than just the threshold. Was it breaking and entering if he had a key? Regardless, he had racked up enough offenses to warrant jail time. A million things could go wrong. What if Maris forgot her wallet and returned? What if he tripped a silent alarm? He fought the urge to run. He ventured deeper inside where some lights were on. Everything looked expensive and oversized, but he needed small stuff. Cash. Jewelry. Find something of value, steal it, convert it to cash, bribe a stranger overseas. Was he an idiot? He caught his reflection in the mirror tiptoeing like a cartoon character, and he got his answer.

He came to the master bedroom. Bingo. Jewelry box on the dresser. It had a tiny lock that he could jimmy open when he got home. Probably not where she kept the expensive stuff. He stashed it in his duffel bag. Then he checked the drawers. His dirty hands groped and pawed at the fabric of Maris's underwear unraveling the last threads of his self-respect. No diamonds, no cash; just bras and panties.

Something moved in Jack's peripheral vision. Startled, he swiveled his body. His flailing arms launched a vase from the dresser. He watched in slow motion as it sailed across the room and smashed against the wood floor. The cat ran. Jack ran.

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“What the hell were you thinking? Do you want me to live my final days with my husband in jail?” Tina’s shouting had triggered a coughing fit. Jack tried to put his arm around her, and she flung it off. A trail of stolen contraband shined and sparkled on the bed.

“You heard the doctor,” Jack said. “Two years. You don’t have enough time.”

“So, you broke into someone’s home. How are you even capable of that?”

Jack rotated a tennis bracelet in his fingers wondering if the diamonds were real. “I guess we’re capable of a lot when it comes to love.”

“Oh, don’t give me that, like you’re some kind of hero.” She snatched an open locket and dangled it in his face. Two children smiled from the tiny heart shaped frame. “You’re going to hand this to the doctor? That’s your plan?”

He had already explained the plan. She was just being difficult. “The only one who loses is the insurance company. I can live with that.”

“Are you serious? Paying a bribe to move me to the front of the line, Jack. Think about it.”

He had. The world had relegated them to the back of the line their entire lives. Their position never advanced because privileged people cut. It wasn’t fair. For once, they had a chance at the front. They argued for an hour, but the outcome was never in question. No matter how he framed it, Tina would never allow herself priority over someone else who needed the lifeline as much as she did. She would rather die.

“What if I don’t want you to die?” Jack said through his tears. “Don’t I get a say?”

Tina took him in her arms, and they cried together. When the tears finally ran dry, Jack shoved everything back in the jewelry box and sped to Maris’s house. Tina refused to keep the stolen jewelry, but even she agreed that Jack shouldn’t invite jailtime by turning himself into the police. The middle ground was to return it.

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He approached the house. He couldn't leave the jewelry box outside or risk someone else taking it. The plan was to open the door and put it in the foyer. In and out in three seconds. Ski mask in place, he crept to the front door. He turned the key and stepped inside. All quiet. The same lights were on as before. She probably went out for drinks after dinner. If he were to put the jewelry box upstairs on the dresser, there would be no police report or investigation. Less chance of getting discovered. She would think the cat had toppled the vase.

The stairs creaked under his feet. No tiptoeing this time. He had to get out before she returned. He rounded the corner and stepped into the master bedroom. Something felt wrong. He didn't stick around to figure out what it was. Just nerves. He fumbled in his bag for the jewelry box and returned it to the dresser. He hurried back to the hallway and down the stairs. Just as he reached the bottom, he realized what was wrong. Panic gripped him. The vase shards were gone. He sprinted to the door. A woman's voice – Maris's – yelling. A flash. A bang. A sharp pain in his gut. He scrambled up from the floor and stumbled out the door.

The drive home was a blur, as he nearly lost consciousness more than once. Surprised there were no police to greet him, he slid out of the car and shuffled in through his front door trailing blood along the sidewalk.

The whisper of an ocean filled Jack's ears. Rhythmic ebbing and flowing of waves. His breathing advancing and receding with the swells, synchronized with nature's chorus. In, out. In, out. A distant chirp so faint as to be forgotten until sounding again. And again. Not a chirp, a beep. Louder now. He tried to open his eyes. They were stuck like old moisture-warped windows. With effort he pried them

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open and peeked through the slitted gaps. He was in a bed, narrow with metal rails. An oxygen mask fogged as he exhaled. A heart monitor beeped. A warm hand held his own. He squeezed it.

Realization dawned and he tried to speak. The words were trapped somewhere between a lodged bullet and a heavy dose of narcotics. "Police?" he finally managed.

Tina clasped her fingers in his. "No," she said. "Not yet anyway."

He nodded. How long did it take to match a police report of a shooting to a hospital admission for a bullet wound? Depending on his condition, it might be a moot point. "How bad?"

She explained that the ER staff temporarily stabilized him, but his injuries were severe. He was being prepped for surgery. They were waiting for a special on-call surgeon.

There was a light knock on the door and then it opened. Jack didn't have the strength to turn so he just stared at the ceiling.

"Good afternoon, I'm —"

"Doctor Williams?" Tina said.

The doctor paused as if trying to place the face. "Tina?"

"Yes, it's me."

Jack clung to consciousness. Doctor Williams. Tina's doctor? The world renowned one that would perform her transplant surgery.

"Sorry, for the delay," the doctor said. "I had to deal with an unexpected personal matter. Shall we have a look at the patient?"

She came into Jack's field of vision. He found himself face to face with Maris. Shame pierced his soul as surely as the bullet had pierced his gut. "Salty," he whispered, the words not penetrating the oxygen mask.

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Shock lit her face as she connected the dots that she would be operating on the man she had shot. Apparently regaining her composure, she offered the hint of a smile. “Hmm, young padawan seems to have gotten himself into some trouble.”

Despite her light words sorrow etched her face. Jack closed his eyes. He picked up bits and pieces of the conversation between Tina and Maris. His chances weren't good.

Tina was led out.

Maris spoke to the assistant in medical jargon about Jack's condition. Most flew over his head, but the last sentence caught his attention. “Let's get an ultrasound of his lungs.”

“His lungs?” the assistant said.

“That's right. Oh, and tell his wife to stick around the waiting room for a bit. And not to eat any solids.”

Jack met her eyes, and they shared a moment of understanding. He mouthed a thank you as he faded out of consciousness.

– End –