

Inaugural National Orthopaedic Literary Prize Entry

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"Tender Loving Care"

Two things stick out to me when I recall my wrist fracture – firstly, the February 2008 weather and secondly, da Silva’s ankle dislocation. Funny the things we remember about the worst moments of our lives.

It was a frigid and furious February at first, but badly animated cartoon suns indicated that it would end, that a sunny spell was coming. I left my canary yellow trench coat at home, put on a silk scarf to cover my neck and went to work. The wind began wailing around lunchtime; umbrellas were starting to open like spring flowers on the paths sprawling around the office block. Co-workers cuddled around the coffee machine, clucking about the latest episode of *CSI*. They marveled at how the stunning forensic scientist could analyse bruising patterns to determine that it *wasn't* the Hispanic gardener but the jealous jilted ex-husband with the hammer. *I mean, who knew?*

I spilled my cheap concealer across the desk, somehow knocking it aside. Cursing. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. Snapped the bottle lid shut, the hens pivoting on their spot to see the commotion. Necks more like owls than old turkeys, maybe. Target acquired – me.

“Did you see it Cathy?”

“No,” I mumbled, *“The match was on. Manchester City. Frank wanted to watch it.”*

“Oh, it’s getting really good! You have to start watching it again – kick him out of the sitting room when it’s on!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah you should!”

I found an old tissue in my drawer, dragged it slowly across the desk. Not enough to clean it up, started digging deeper. Old band-aid wrappers and empty concealer & foundation bottles, some samples. Not even an old coffee-ringed napkin to help. Closed the drawer, too fast, the plastic bottles clunking together inside as they rocked around.

“It’s wrong anyway” I blurted out. All of us taken aback.

“Hmm? What’s that, pet?”

“The bruises. You can’t age them accurately at all, they break down at different times. They don’t all get lighter the same way, even in the same person. Plus, if they’re really deep they can take longer to come up to the surface.”

I could *feel* their eyelids close, millimetre by millimetre. Examining, checking me. Darting to the desk, the beige puddle before me, the overwhelmed, soggy tissue.

“Really? Wellll... I’m not expert on things like that I suppose”

“Mmmm...”

“Just a bit of fun...”

“Tsk, now, I don’t watch it for those gory details...”

They started to put their cups in the sink, each clink adding to the final chorus as they left the kitchenette one-by-one and went back to their desks. May was last. She threw her bag on the counter, yellow fingernails digging inside a (badly) counterfeited leather handbag. Right hand, prize found,

Marlboro tucked into the corner of her lip. Muted words slipping out the other side as she continued to excavate deeper inside the bag.

"I hate those shows too. Inaccurate. Ah-*mazing* how they all look so good when they're pulled out of bed at 3am to some grotty old motel in the desert. And the bodies? *Ha!* Look even better sometimes. Aha, here!"

She threw a small purse pocket of Kleenex at me.

"Thank you," I said.

"No problem," she said, heading for the balcony.

I finally cleaned up my desk and checked my make-up in the reflection on my computer screen. Brushed my fingertips against my collarbone, it looked even. The nape of my neck still sang shrilly beneath my fingertips. I covered it with my palm, holding the back of my neck. Small area, not easily noticed, I hoped. Nearly whacked my elbow of the corner of the desk whipping it away when May came back.

"*Whew!* It's pure *wild* out there!" she exhaled loudly and walked over to my cubicle. Leaned over the edge of my cubicle. The scent of smoke following her like a late companion, a doting lover with a last-minute peck on the cheek for her. She nodded at my desk.

"All cleaned up?"

"Yeah, thanks May," I said. "At last".

"You don't have a car, do you Cathy?" May asked.

"No, I normally walk in. It's not far," I replied, easing my chair on its wheels closer to the computer.

"Tsk. It's too wet out there- and it's only going to get worse love. Hop home with me today. I normally pass that lovely yellow coat of yours when I'm crawling in the traffic. You must be on the way anyway."

"Oh, it's fine May, honestly, it's two seconds.."

"Nonsense. I'll pop back over to you at five. You're coming. Bad enough lighting one out there, it damn nearly pushed me over the railings on my second fag. Besides, you owe me a pack of tissues now. Be handy to have your address to be sure I'm compensated."

"No, really, I..."

She was gone. The smoke hung around longer than it took to arrive after her. I wondered why she didn't just put two in her mouth before going outside if that was what she was going to do then anyway.

I didn't know May that well then. Months later, I learned that she was one of those older people "retired-but-rehired" at a premium via some agency or another. Between cigarettes she gave out about her husband who never listened, her children who never called and her cough that never really went away. The wind rattled the windows all afternoon. I cursed leaving my coat at home and finally acquiesced; I might get home faster than walking anyway, I hoped.

May screeched up outside my apartment block. No indicators. Something about the weather and the Government and how she should finally remortgage and move to the Canaries and...I looked out and up.

The light wasn't on; I realised I'd forgotten to exhale. I nearly did but then I saw it: a miniscule movement between the Venetian blinds. A flicker no doubt, but definitely there.

"I'm sorry, I don't have a tag to open the gate," I apologised. My mouth seemed to crack between the words; my tongue felt like cotton.

“No worries,” she said breezily. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, probably,” I said, getting out. Clumsily caught the end of my scarf in the door and had to open it again, May’s loud laugh punctuating between white-knuckle grasps of the door handle, open-*laugh*-shut. She beeped the horn chirpily and was gone, into the wind and rain, indicators once more be damned. I strangely missed the smell of smoke, nothing to follow me. Lonely keys clinking against the lock. Shoes squeaking up the complex’s shared stairs.

When I got to our apartment the door was open. The hallway light was off. Frank’s suitcase by the door. I nearly tripped over it on the way in but not just because it was dark. It was never home before I was. I’d never seen it from this side of the doorway. Dinner should always be on, the heavy cloud of a favourite roast dinner and a cold drink ready when it touches the floor. Not this. The television so animated with sunny spells this morning was now dull, dead, off. I don’t think I would have heard anything from hand-wringing weathermen today anyway over the pounding in my chest.

I heard the glass clink on the countertop before I rounded the corner into the kitchen. The usual questions, the usual pleading answers. My coat on the couch, like I’d left it behind this morning. A splash of yellow in the dark. Rivulets of rain danced across the patio door of our balcony. The streetlights flickered on and the golden glow hummed across the glass, through the pane of glass and water and shimmered across the coat as I looked at it sideways. *Stupid stupid stupid*. I should have worn it, I should have walked- *didn’t I know he wasn’t stupid or blind, he could see I got a lift? Sure the whole complex could see?* I said it was the weather, the rain, an insistent *female* colleague. It didn’t matter. Sometimes it was like flipping a coin, heads he sulks, tails he smacks.

I guess I lost the toss-up. He was sorrier than ever this time. So sorry it was almost before the thud.

There was one Kleenex left in May’s packet. I struggled to open it, to remove the adhesive slip with a humming, throbbing wrist. It looked like a limp swan with a fat neck. He took out the tissue for me, white flashes across my field of vision. I saw tiny scarlet droplets on his knuckles between pillowy delicate dabs against my lip. He helped me, brushed the hair out of my face. As his fingers skimmed my jawbone I could remember them from before. The nape of my neck buzzed like a reflex, remembering. It was work, he wanted to surprise me and I wasn’t here. He was stressed. I had to know he was sorry. After all, he had cried, hadn’t he??

I got up slowly. Flicked on the light switches, so unfamiliar with a left hand. The rain outside disappeared when the light came on and I saw myself, light and my reflection flooding the glass. Silk scarf still hiding my dusky neck. Right arm arched like a wing on a broken bird. *Stupid stupid stupid*. I remember a strange thought- *I don’t have gloves big enough to cover this. Oven mitts maybe?*

I heard him take out pots and pans in the kitchen, unfamiliar. The wrong one for the potatoes, too big, but I sat down and stayed silent. Struggled to cut the meat with one hand, tried to remember to smile between the twinges beneath the cuff of a woolen jumper he’d fetched for me. Little, sharp reminders to stay happy. I remembered my mental to-do list. More concealer. More Kleenex. No lifts home.

The next day at work I left before lunch and went to my GP who said I needed to go to A&E. A formality. When you hit your head before a few times, you get used to the questions. It’s always the same; you come in with your hand hanging off you and they’re worried about everything else. Pain? Vision? Feeling? Awake before? Awake after? How long? Any vomiting? Blah blah blah. It’s funny the things you

remember about something like that. I remember some young student asking me to focus when I told him about the torrential rain that evening, how my shoes had squeaked and I'd left my coat behind. "Please recall details that matter". *Did I have any pets? Did I live in a bungalow? Did I live alone?* Much more important than the rain. *Stupid stupid stupid.*

Later that week, we curled up on the couch. I told him I wanted to watch the match tonight and he smiled. I didn't pay attention at all, I was far away but jolted back to where I was two times— once, when twelve minutes in he growled at a bad pass. "Fool!" and I tensed, Pavlovian, but he wasn't angry at me.

Next, when Taylor tackled da Silva. Immediately something was amiss. The wrong angle, the wrong fall. BBC reluctantly replayed it and Frank oohed and looked away – tucked into my shoulder, on the couch. Winced and snarled before looking back: "The pain of *that!*" My wrist chimed in agreement.

I looked at Frank, hand on my alien thigh. The commentators rattled on as the cameras looked anywhere but the injured athlete, the fallen star. Cameras cut to sobbing supporters in the crowd and devastated teammates on the bench. *So full of promise.... £7.5 million signing... promising young talent, potentially now cut short... Wenger's latest nightmare....* We looked at da Silva rolling around, gripping his leg, inaudible curses in Portuguese. Nobody to listen.

Frank shook his head, temples bulging as he hissed between gritted teeth. He saw me. "Don't you feel sorry for him?" he asked, exasperated. "I do," I whispered, wrist vibrating. "Of course I do."