

The Usual Mistakes

The hospital where I work is actually a hotel—a renovated Best Western, just south of Omaha. The doctors kept much of the original décor, making only minor structural changes: the exercise room was expanded to include a pharmacy, the dank bar renovated into a chapel, although I don't think anyone's ever been there to pray. Check-ins sit on the same red and beige floral sofas vacationers would rest on while waiting for their sheets to be changed, in town for an Omaha Royals game or a trip to the Henry Doorly Zoo. Cora, the receptionist, stands behind the large, oak desk greeting patients and ringing the bell when their rooms are ready. The chandelier in the main lobby still glitters and tinkles when a breeze blows in, as if announcing the possibility of a wonderful time.

I worked for four years as night manager of this Best Western. When the hotel closed, I forged my credentials, created a pre-med degree from Creighton University with a 3.96 grade point, and voilà, I'm a medical assistant. I'm no more licensed to assist in medical procedures than I am to fly a plane, but I've been here almost eight months, and no one seems to notice.

Many of the patients look as if they're here for vacations, wearing what can only be described as cruise-wear: shiny fuchsia jogging suits with gold braided trim, khaki pants and pale golf shirts, an occasional visor. It's a private hospital specializing in reconstructive surgeries and prosthetics. We do plastic surgery, although I'm not allowed to call it that. Our patients like that the rooms are still decorated as hotel

rooms. They say it makes them feel less like they're staying at a hospital and more at home, ignoring that, other than the car wrecks and burn victims, they don't need to be here at all. In truth, the linens, beds, and curtains were thrown in at such a ridiculously low rate when the hotel foreclosed, that the hospital would have been foolish to pass on them.

I work banker's hours, nine to five.

Cora rings me in the nurse's lounge, room 143 next to the Coke and ice machines, and tells me the two o'clock is here. "Good thing you blocked a lot of time," Cora says. "She's a real code red, if you know what I mean." Cora is seventeen and last weekend, drunk on Zima, had her belly button pierced; I'm thirty-one, a dead husband not a year in the ground, and barely able to make my mortgage payment. I rarely know what she means.

In the lobby, standing next to a faux-antique red divan, is a girl no larger than a ten-year-old boy, wearing clean blue jeans and a long-sleeved green T-shirt, reading the bulletin board. She has straight, clean brown hair and an ordinariness to her features that could be feminine or masculine, depending on your attentions—a strong, block nose and long, soft lashes. Poking out of the cuff of her right sleeve on the underside of her wrist is a dark line that looks as if it were drawn with a thick, black, permanent marker. It corners at a perfect ninety-degree angle into another black line and I realize, with a start, it's a swastika.

The girl looks up and tugs at the sleeve of her shirt. Of course, how odd it is to see someone dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and pants in ninety-plus heat, middle of summer, Omaha, Nebraska. I wonder what other tattoos are under there and, when the girl turns to look at the clock, I'm sure I see the nickel-sized head of a snake coming out of her hair, a modern day neo-Nazi Medusa. I look down at my clipboard. "Abbie Nelson?"

"That's me," she says and picks up the army-green duffel bag at her feet. "You the doctor or what?" Over Abbie's shoulder, Cora leans her elbows on the oak desk and folds her hair in her fingers, wiggling the blond strands like snakes.

I hold out my hand as I've been taught to do; the patients, Dr. Stein believes, feel more comfortable dealing with a friend, as if they're here for lunch rather than a new body part. "Assistant," I say. "I'm Eleanor." Abbie slings the tattered bag over her shoulder and it momentarily pulls her off balance. Whatever's in there, it weighs a lot.

In room 217, Abbie Nelson looks around as if we've possibly been transported to the wrong building. The examination rooms still look like singles with king-sized beds and desks, although we've moved in exam tables. "Is this a hotel?" she asks.

"A Best Western."

She sits on the too-soft bed and I sit at the desk with the attached lamp and ask her medical history—any allergies, what medications, diseases running in the family blood. I'm anxious to get to it, to see what kind of damage has been done, but I follow the questions on the form. "How many tattoos?" I ask.

"Twelve," Abbie says. "I've got nerve damage from the one on the top of my foot." I write this down.

"Where are they?"

Abbie gives me a list that spans her entire body, beginning at the bottom of her foot, trailing up the left calf, jumping to the right thigh, right buttock, her pelvis, the knobs of her spine, left shoulder, right tricep, both wrists, the backside of her neck, and the snake, which curls around her scalp and down behind her left ear to the jawbone. "It's a lot of ink," she says.

We finish the form and I ask her to undress as I hand her a paper robe. "Right here?" she says. Looking around the hotel room it does feel illicit, the curtains drawn against the bludgeoning summer rain, the king-sized bed next to the exam table. The table, with the stirrups and pedals, gives the room an ominous bent, as if it is part hotel, part medieval chamber.

"You can go in the bathroom if you'd feel more comfortable," I say. "I'll be waiting in the hall. Just shout when you're ready."

A moment later she calls out, and I open the door.

Sitting on the bed in the robe, Abbie looks like she weighs less than a hundred pounds, maybe less than ninety, and she is covered like a

billboard of hate. Her legs are crossed at the ankle, and on her left calf is a blood-red “A” dripping inside a circle. Her upper arms are ringed with barbed wire. Swastikas inside both wrists. The top of one delicate pink foot reads “FUCK” in gothic script, a smiley face is impaled on a stick on her thigh. I do my best to offer a comforting smile, although I know it’s too late—she already saw the horror on my face.

“You did better than most,” she says. She traces the swastika on her wrist with a finger; I wonder if for years to come she will trace that pattern long after it’s gone, like those suffering from phantom-limb syndrome. “Wait,” she says. “There’s more. We might as well get it over with all at once.” And she takes off the robe. Her back is covered with two crossed hammers, there’s a closed fist circled by a laurel wreath on one buttock. Although I’m not sure what each symbol means, I know I’ve never seen so much rage. Her face is almost placid, and it reminds me of those games I’d play as a child where I’d match three tracing plates from pants, shirt, and hair to form an outfit. I never would have put this head with this body, and yet there’s something in her face, maybe sorrow, that completes the picture.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” I tell her. “You need to know what you’re in for with this kind of removal.”

She points at the tattoo slithering down her neck. “You think I don’t have an idea what I might be getting into?”

Over the next fifteen minutes, waiting for Dr. Stein, I explain how the laser works. It dissipates the ink approximately thirty-five percent, so the effectiveness will be less and less with each treatment—thirty-five percent of a hundred the first time, thirty-five percent of sixty-five the second, and so on. I can’t stop staring at the wreckage. Abbie nods along, fingering the frayed strap on her duffel bag. “You might be surprised,” she says, “but I’m good in math. I understand what you’re saying.” The procedure will take eight to ten treatments. In plastic surgery, we use terms like “procedure” and “treatment,” words that sound medical, so patients will feel they’re spending their money on something worthwhile. Abbie may be the first case I’ve seen in the past eight months that actually is. It’s 250 dollars per treatment of a five-by-five-inch surface; Abbie’s will cost up to 1,250 dollars a visit.

“I know,” she says. “I’ve done my research.”

I excuse myself for a moment and come back with the camera I keep in my locker. “I’ll need to take pictures for your file,” I tell her. Truth is, no one knows I take pictures of the patients. I focus on the skull and crossbones on Abbie’s thigh, the winged butterfly that flutters from one end of her pelvis bone to the other. The artwork itself is terrible—blurred lines as if the ink were cut into her skin with a rusty knife. She holds up her hair and I snap a landscape shot of the ss lightning bolts on the back of her neck. I put the camera in my pocket as Dr. Stein enters.

Dr. Stein is in his mid-fifties and has eyes that turn down at the corners, so he appears perpetually sad. He recently put his dog to sleep and now walks the halls like a ghost, haunting the hospital staff with pitiful questions of whether or not he made the right decision, although he doesn’t want our answers. He begins to tell Abbie the same things I have about the cost and effectiveness of the procedure. “We’re talking about a chunk of change,” he says. “And we don’t take checks.” Abbie doesn’t look at him, and he doesn’t look at Abbie. She keeps her eyes trained on me, nodding as he tells her, basically, he doesn’t think she can afford it. I reach out and brush the hair from her shoulder as if there were a piece of lint.

“I’ve got some money saved,” she says to me.

Dr. Stein writes “I want payment up-front” on his notepad and turns it toward me. We talk for five more minutes about follow-up, the antiseptic gel she’ll need to apply to each treated area for two weeks, the six-week wait required between sessions.

I follow Dr. Stein to the hallway and he writes her name on a manila file, puts in his notes, and hands it to me. “I’ve never seen anything like that,” he says. “With those people in the world, I’m almost glad Sheba’s gone.” Sheba was his dog, a reddish-tan Whippet with the sad, sleek face of a very thin woman.

As Dr. Stein gets in the elevator, I knock softly on the door until Abbie says, “Come in.” She pulls the T-shirt over her white belly just as I enter then slings the duffel bag over her shoulder, stumbling a step

before righting herself. We stand facing each other for a long, awkward moment.

“Do I need to fill out some more papers or something?” she asks.

“No, that’s it,” I say. “You’re free to go.”

She nods, and I walk her to the front desk where we make an appointment to start treatments the next day; we’re never so busy we can’t fit someone in on short notice. Cora comes back from break in time to watch Abbie climb into a rusted Chevy Impala. “What’d she want,” Cora says. “A nose job?”

On the way home I stop at Walgreens on Ninetieth and Center, and wait in the car for the film to be developed. It’s usually my favorite time of day—the sun beginning to set in a violent pink and purple—but this summer we’ve barely seen the sun. With the rains, I had to put a bucket down in my bedroom in late May, but there isn’t a room on the second floor now without a minimum of three buckets or pans. The longer I hold out, the worse it will become, but Frank didn’t have life insurance and, even with my new, better-paying career, I’m months away from affording a new roof.

An hour later I start home, the pictures in my purse in the passenger seat. I won’t look at them until I’m alone, safe in my house. As always, I feel a tug when I round the corner and see my home—the original brick from 1912, a smattering of irises by the front porch, an oak with a trunk the circumference of a poker table. Frank and I bought this house seven years ago and lived here in a-little-below-average happiness. When I pull into the driveway there’s a boy sitting on my porch. I assume it’s the Enger kid from down the block, a fifteen-year-old punk who’s shown up on my doorstep the past three Halloweens with a pillowcase bulging like an overgrown, obscene gourd. I pull down the garage door and walk to the porch, and for a moment I’m convinced I see his bag of loot protruding from behind the porch swing. I look closer and see that under the cap it’s not Mark Enger but Abbie, her duffel bag behind her, the tattoos covered under a button-down blouse. My breath catches; I’m sure she knows about the pictures, that I’m going to be called up on some kiddie-porn charge. I reach into my purse and

feel the cardboard of the envelope, relieved that the pictures are with me, not loose at Walgreens or nailed to the front door of my house.

“I got your ad,” she says and holds up a tiny sheet of paper with my phone number on it. “From the bulletin board at the hospital.” I’ve been running an ad for a tenant the past three weeks. I swore when Frank died it wouldn’t come to this, but ten months later I do what I can. It’s four hundred a month plus split utilities, no separate entrance or private kitchen. I haven’t gotten many calls—two actually, one placed from inside a prison, the other from Cora seeing if she could rent the space for keggers.

I’m not sure what to say to Abbie. In the context of the hospital I’d felt bad for her, but out here in my real world, on the porch of my house, I feel bad for only myself. “How’d you get my address?”

“Reverse directory at the library.” She scratches at the hat she’s wearing, and I see the rings of sweat collecting in her armpits, the damp neck of the long-sleeved blouse. The rain has done nothing to alleviate the heat.

“I don’t have air conditioning,” I tell her, and she shrugs. “Besides, it’s rented.”

“I doubt that,” Abbie says and continues to stare at me.

“Even if it weren’t rented, it’d be unethical—me living with a patient.”

Abbie picks at the ring in her nose. “We’re not treating AIDS here,” she says. “I just need a place to live.” I remember our brief contact—my hand brushing her shoulder—and wonder if she’s built that into compassion, or if only I do that: redefine the purposeful bump of a thigh on the public bus, the swoop of flesh on flesh while counting my change into a cashier’s hand. “I’ve got a steady job,” she continues, “and I’ll pay on time. Even early if you want, up to two weeks.” She holds out a sheet of paper and turns it right side up so I can read it—a pay stub from Super America. “See,” she says and shakes the paper.

I smile in what I hope is a sympathetic manner. “I would, but it’s already rented. I told you.”

Abbie gets up and puts the pay stub back in her pocket then reaches behind the porch swing. She pulls out the duffel bag, and I wonder if

she's got no place to stay tonight, if she's going to sleep at the Greyhound station, or Denny's, or in the back room of Super America. "I know it's not," she says and swings the duffel onto her back. It takes a lot of control to not rescue her as she walks off the porch, as she trails that duffel bag down the middle-class street I'm about to be kicked off of, but I don't.

Upstairs, only after I've poured a glass of iced tea and stripped to the bare essentials so I can sleep in the heat, do I finally look at the pictures. They're taken too close up so all I can see is the runny color on a doughy background, although the ribs give away that it's a person. In the pictures, the images are even more striking, although removed. It's as if I could be looking at a picture cut from a prison magazine, not a girl I'd met earlier that day. The lines and curves are so blurred on her skin you'd think they could be smudged off with a little spit and Kleenex, not cut into her skin with needles and ink. It's amazing seeing one clean calf against the other, what Abbie must have looked like before.

I open the nightstand drawer and put Abbie's pictures in with the others—a woman's stomach so fat it looks like the landscape of the moon; a seven-year-old boy who fell from a three-story building, crashing the cartilage of his nose to within two millimeters of his brain; a man's foot with only one toe, the other four removed by the man himself.

I'm fascinated by these patients and what they've endured, all those visible mistakes.

At the hospital the next morning, I watch a woman pass outside in a skirt so short, for a moment I think she's wearing nothing but a tank top and panties. She turns to open the door and I recognize Mrs. VanRockel, a sixty-eight-year-old patient who had her breasts done for the third time just last month. "Ooh la la," Cora says. "Lock up your grandsons."

Mrs. VanRockel rushes over and puts her fingernails in my shoulders and kisses the part in my hair. At least when this place was a hotel, I was able to avoid direct and extended contact with the same