



WE ARE IN HELL. -

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I don't regularly get phone calls these days. After switching to the midnight shift three agonizing years ago, my life altered to work-to-live from live-to-work. I sleep all day to work ten hour nights, six days a week in the plastic factory, and the time to see friends, family and take a deep breath goes out the window.

It is strange to see a plethora of missed calls when I finally awake around one in the afternoon on my biblical day of rest. Three Norm, one sister and an unknown 810. One voicemail.

"Hey, buddy. It's Norman," my stepfather said on the voicemail. "Give me a call when you get this. It's. It's about your mom. She's in the hospital. Talk to you soon. Love you."

I roll out of bed and tumble up the stairs into the kitchen. I grab the closest box of cereal and start heaping it into a bowl.

My roommate Kevin shouts from the other room, "Want to watch the Lions get their ass kicked?"

I despise organized sports. I can not imagine a worse way to spend my only free day than to watch football until the sun goes down.

"Nope. Got better things to do today," I say, shoveling Cheerios into my mouth.

I call Michelle back first. Her and I are strange ducks, so surely her point of view would serve me better than that of my downtrodden stepfather.

"Brother bear," she answers.

"Hallo, meine schwester. What's up?"

“Driving out to Port Huron. Mom’s in the hospital again.”

Of course she is. She’s been in and out of every hospital on the east side of the state for the past 6 years. “What this time?” I asked.

“Call Norm. Gotta merge. Don’t want to get smashed by a semi.”

Since she was 45, my mother has been in a serious state of pain. The doctors thought it was the hernias in her pelvis, but once those were removed, the pain only got worse. It crippled her ability to stand, walk, even hold a conversation before bursting into tears. She had to quit her job because the bumpiness of a car ride would send pain throughout her entire body. As she was the sole moneymaker between her and Norm, her second husband, it put them in distraught financial times.

Mom has endured nerve blocks, C.A.T. scans, MRIs, X-rays, physical therapy, acupuncture and three rounds of Botox injections in her pelvic floor. I even loaned them 8,000 dollars towards their towering medical expenses. The only thing that had ever seemed to hinder the pain was heaps of painkillers.

When the doctors stopped prescribing them, she turned to my hoodlum friends and picked up Vicodin on an extreme mark-up. The best deal I ever heard her getting was 100 of them for 450 dollars. When you’re ingesting handfuls at a time, 100 pain pills only last a week’s duration.

Naturally, I try not to think about these things. It’s sad to see your own mother fall to pieces, but there wasn’t much I could do. My 50-plus-hour work schedule makes it difficult to visit regularly. I consider myself a bad son.

“Hey, buddy,” a solemn-sounding Norm says once I call him.

“Hello, sir. What’s going on?”

“I’m,” Norm sniffled on the end of the line. “Your mom, she tried to kill herself last night.”

Mom, after another multiple hour crying session deep into the midnight hours, gulped down two giant handfuls of painkillers and went to sleep, hoping to not wake up again.

Some part of her felt guilt and she awoke her husband, burst into tears and told her suicide scheme.

“I took her across the street to Port Huron Mercy, and the doctors have been pumping her stomach and giving her all sorts of,” Norm paused. “I don’t know what I I’m gonna do.”

“I’m on my way there.”

I drive the speed limit on the forty-some minute wind through the seasonal traffic cones. I like watching the weather change. Cloudless skies of endless blue until speckles of white puffs muddle and mass into a sheet for the sky.

I park at Norm’s house, a block from the hospital. The little blue ranch with its turquoise shutters always open to the public on this friendly street. I start the short walk to Mercy. A neighbor whose name I do not recall waves at me during his Sunday lawn upkeep. He is enjoying his sunny afternoon. He does not see everything is gray, the way I do.

From the corner of 10th and Electric, I spot Norm’s obnoxiously loud red Ford F-150 and plumes of smoke rising into the atmosphere. Judging by the little pile of cigarettes forming outside of the driver’s door, he has been out here chain-smoking for forty minutes since we got off the phone.

“Hey, there,” I say to Norm and lean up against the door’s frame. He has his sunglasses on and his goatee looks unkempt.

“Come sit down,” Norm says.

I hop into the cab of the truck. He adjusts his sunglasses to his hairline and wipes his eyes with a napkin, takes three large blinks to clear his tear ducts and flicks his cigarette butt. It skips across the parking lot and rolls to a stop in front of a ‘Smoke-Free Campus’ sign.

I had never seen Norm cry, nor would I have expected it. The military crew-cut man with boulders for shoulders and gunpowder kegs in his arms, Norm would have scolded me if I ever let my emotions hang on my sleeve like that.

“It’s been a hell of day,” he says, dabbing his eyes with the soggy napkin.

I fold my hands into my lap and watch Norm take out an-

other cigarette. The tension in the truck made me awkward. I do not know how am I supposed to be.

“We’ve been through this for years. Why would, why she would want to do this now I don’t know,” Norm says to me, although it felt I could be anyone else and he would have talked nonetheless. “If she wanted to do this, she should’ve tried before we invested all the time and money in the doctors. What the hell have we been fighting for!”

Norm becomes silent. He rests his colossal palm on his head, inhaling, exhaling a breath of smoke. He places his right hand on my upper back.

“I just don’t know what I would do without her. I love Beverly,” he snuffles. “I’d be lost without her.”

“Me neither,” I say.

“Come on. Your sister’s inside already,” he says, adjusting his sunglasses onto the collar of his stained Marine Corps T-Shirt. We exit the truck.

I followed him through the automatic doors and the fluorescent labyrinth of the hospital. I haven’t spent much time in either, but I always feel like a hospital and a prison could be the same place. The walls are lifeless, the air conditioning gave me goose bumps, every worker walks by burying their nose in a sheet on a clipboard, and when they do notice me, they all give that same sorrowful look. The look that tells you there is no hope.

We turn into an eastern wing waiting room. Norm hits a button near a set of sealed double-doors.

“Patient name,” droned through the intercom.

“It’s Norman, for Beverly Moore, again,” he said.

The doors pan open like they do in horror movies, slow and steady-like. To our left is a long desk, to the right curtains shielding the temporary living quarters of patients. Between the few curtains that were open, families met with their sick, kneeling at the bedside, holding flowers. The same rituals are performed at funerals, I think.

We come upon the last station on the right. Norm taps on the curtain with large fist, the metal rings jangling against the

steel rail. Someone inside peels the curtain back to allow us entry. My sister is sitting in a small chair, hands in her lap and her head down, long curly brunette hair covering up her face. Her rainbow sweater is rolled up to the elbows. She has the same goose bumps.

“Hi, brother,” she says meekly.

“Hey,” I mutter, busy taking in reality.

In the center of the room, surrounded by massive machinery ejecting tubes and wires rests my mother. She is withered and pale, like a body dragged up from a lake. Her curly hair is drained of color, and the lack of glasses emphasizes the age around her eyes. Her mouth is open with one of those tubes hooked in her mouth like a fish. A cheap cloth substituting as a blanket covers much of her body, but the visible flesh of her arms seems loose and lifeless, spreading in a puddle-like fashion where it lies. The living dead, I think.

“We’ll have to wake her up soon for lunch,” a middle-aged nurse says, flipping through a prognosis.

“I don’t want to eat.” A nearly inaudible moan comes out of my mother. Her voice is a raspy whisper and she perfects ventriloquism, as the tube in her mouth moves not an inch as she croaks her crackled speech. “Michelle?”

“Right here,” my sister says in a high-pitched voice. False optimism.

Mom rolls her head and starts speaking so softly Michelle had to get off her chair and lean in to hear. Michelle’s eyes are wide with horror, like watching a car crash you can’t stop staring at. She stands up and walks out of the room, clutching a Kleenex in her right hand.

I sink into Michelle’s old position next to the shell of the mother I remembered. “Hi, Mom.” I do not know what else to say.

She opens her purple eyelids. Little slits of black pupils look at me. “I’m sorry,” she sighs.

I nod. I nod uncontrollably like a bobble-head doll. I am sorry, as well.

“I’ll get your money eventually,” she says.

“It’s okay, Mom.” The money is the least of my concerns. Consider it a gift, for my blunt absence in your life when you needed it most, I think.

Norm looms over as I sit, scanning my mother. I watch the machines that carry her life, or what sliver is left of it. Rhythmic beeps kept the room from complete silence. I have nothing to say. I feel there is nothing I can say.

Norm grabs a hold of Mom’s limp hand. She groans. “I am in Hell.”

“We all are, Bevy,” he says as he wipes a burly forearm underneath his eyes.

“Do me a favor?”

“Yes?”

“Go get your gun,” she croaks, “and shoot me. I don’t want to do this anymore.” She sighs out a heavy breath.

“They’re going to fix you up and the doctors are going to take care of you and get you back together.”

“No they’re not, it’s not going to get better,” she says. If she had any energy she would have screamed, but a wispy moan is all she can muster. Her tiny eyes look at me. “Misery loves me.”

Mom starts to cry. Snot bubbles at her nostrils, but she can not lift her arm to clean it. Norm starts to cry, as well. I sit in the chair and watch their helplessness.

“I just want to die,” she cries. If she could have pulled the power cord from the wall, she would have. If Mom could move enough to grab the surgical utensils from the roving cart in the corner, she would have ended herself right there in the middle of the hospital.

But she can not. All she can do is lie and be observed by the jury, the staff and small family that showed up in support of her life that she could no longer suffer. She is weak and powerless. She wants solace and peace of mind.

She lets out a whimper and tries to shake the rails of the bed, all the force she can manage to muster inside her feeble drug-pumped body. The nurse reenters the room with a tray of mushed food.

“Lunchtime, Bev.”

Her agonizing moans subsides. “I don’t want to eat.”

The nurse looks at me, and then Norm, who shielded his eyes with one of his large hands. “You can come back after we get some food in her.”

We go into the waiting room, where Michelle is nose-deep in a magazine and a TV blaring halftime scores. Norm pours himself a Dixie cup of coffee and stirred it until it was cold. I watch the Lions lose to the Vikings, 24–10.

Norman finally breaks the silence. “I’m going to grab some lunch.” He tossed his untouched coffee into a garbage can and leaves the room.

Michelle closes the magazine and lets out a sigh. She looks over at me. “Brother.”

“Sister.”

“I don’t want Mom to die.” She sounds like a small child. How quickly she goes from 25 to five years old surprises me.

“I don’t want that either. Maybe,” I drift off. I don’t know whether to give her bleak and unrealistic optimism or stroke the growing flames of pessimism. “Hopefully she’ll feel better.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes are red and tired. She is at the same loss for words I am. “I’m going to go get food, too.”

When I come back to the room, Mom is sleeping again to the beat of the heart monitor. If the EKG didn’t show a faint flutter of the heart, I would have been convinced she was dead. Her concaved chest does not rise or fall with signs of life. She sleeps peacefully on the gurney, dried up with that plastic hook in her mouth, a fish out of water rotted by the sun.

I find myself inching closer to her, trying not to disturb her solitude. I clasp my hands on the metal bed frame and sink to my knees. I still remember all the tough mother moments she projected on me growing up, the workhorse ethic, lessons instilled in me that pushed me away from being a son. She scolded me on my 16th birthday for not already having a job.

Before I realize it, I am crying. If not for my tears hitting the linoleum tiles I might not have ever known. I sink my palms into my forehead and blubber. I do not want my mother

to die. I do not want to believe this is happening. I do not want her to leave while I realize I am a neglectful son. I know she can hear me.

I whisper, "I'm sorry, Mom. I love you. Don't leave us yet."

I feel a hand on my shoulder, a familiar gesture. I see Norm's big black boot. I look up at him as he makes his way to the window and parts the blinds. I listen to the beat of the heart monitor. The clouds are gone.