

FICTION JUNE 1, 2020 ISSUE

TWO NURSES, SMOKING

By David Means

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Photograph by Lewis Khan



Audio: David Means reads.

FROM A WIDE VANTAGE

Two hospital workers, somewhat lonely-looking figures, taking a smoke break, back behind a trailer, leaning toward each other as they talked softly beside a row of neatly trimmed bushes. One had long hair and thin, pale arms that dangled from her scrubs. The other was big, burly, with a tattoo on his arm. Even that day in June—if you paid close attention, driving past—you might’ve seen desire in the way she pointed her toe and dug it into the dusty concrete while she listened to him, or you might’ve noticed the way he swayed as he talked, because he liked to riff on the subject at hand, and, lately, the last few times, when she

visited with the trailer, he had expounded upon the recent news: a serial-killer nurse who had confessed to murdering, somewhere in Pennsylvania, at least a dozen patients. She, for her part, added a little commentary here and there, because it was a shared story that somehow seemed to make the job a bit easier, the kind of bullshit story that you'd tell to kill time, and she liked his deep, no-nonsense tone, which, she thought, might've come from his stint in the Army. He had green eyes that became deeply serious when he was listening.

THE BOND

Began to form in the way they both moved during the breaks—in the solitude they sought between the bushes and the long flank of the trailer, a dirty sliver of parking-lot curb where cigarette butts and litter had blown up. Between them was a secretive energy, a conspiracy formed out of a mutual history. (Or maybe the conspiracy formed a sense of mutual history. Maybe it wasn't so simple.) As a kid she had lived in one of those motels, Holiday Court, that had turned itself over to long-term renters—folks who paid by the week but did so year in and year out when they could, building an easy camaraderie, fighting in the parking lot, spilling blood, bringing the police—the daughter of a fuckup mom with zero parenting skills. A kind, encouraging counsellor at her high school named Mrs. Hargrove, who gave her hope, urged her to take a heroic leap to community college, and then nursing school on a scholarship. He'd grown up in Nevada near a town called Ely, on the Shoshone reservation, without a father, spending a lot of his time alone in the countryside, staying out of his mom's way, and then, suddenly, they'd moved East to a trashy apartment in Newburgh, New York, with a new dad who liked to drink as much as his mother did.

THE KIDNEY POUNDER

As she liked to call it, was inside the trailer. Technically, the pounder's called a lithotripsy machine, she said, and it delivers extracorporeal shock waves and breaks up the stones. Around the metropolitan area, and sometimes in upstate New York, she followed the trailer to cut-rate hospitals, assisting whatever doctor had been assigned to it by putting the patients onto the platform, adjusting the Velcro straps, giving her spiel about how this would hurt but not as much as passing a big stone—if it even passed—and then she'd work the device, pushing as gently as possible while the pulsing waves of ultrasonic energy broke the stone apart.

A MALE PATIENT

Would come into the trailer, bitching and moaning, and use the occasion to touch her knee. A woman would come in, gaunt and frail, barely able to walk, resisting all help, clambering onto the platform, brushing away her offered hand.

ALL PAIN

Seemed to be equalized as she worked the machine, pressing the device, hitting the stone hard with ultrasonic energy, until personality and differences seemed to her to be fused into a single point.

THE SCAR

That ran down his neck—just missing his carotid artery, she noticed—and disappeared beneath his scrubs gave, when she asked him about it, an excuse to talk about the war, the time an I.E.D. hit his Hummer, blowing a tire off the vehicle, sending shrapnel through the undercarriage and into his buddy's arm. Bleeding bad, his friend screamed that he was dying, that his arm was shredded meat. But the dude's arm was perfectly fine in the end and it was only the fog-of-war shit. I guess I'm gonna live, his buddy said when he finally realized that his arm was still there, I guess I'm O.K., Chief.

KIDNEY BOY

Was this kid, barely twenty, a junkie from the looks of it, suffering for a couple of weeks while the trailer was way up North in a place called Watertown, licking a morphine lollipop, with a big stone and a tight ureter, meaning, like, the worst-case scenario: he's not only going to be pounded but it's going to take a couple of sessions and the fragments are going to pass one at a time, and then a ureteral stent will be put in, too. The kid had this crooked jaw from a bad rewire, and when I unstrapped him he kissed me and said I saved his life, said it like he meant it, and I tried not to let him see it in my eyes—you know, the things I was seeing about his future—she told Marlon one day. He leaned forward and listened to her without a word.

DURING

Most of these breaks, the air-conditioner in the trailer would pop on, devouring the sounds: the tink of a ball hitting the backstop at the schoolyard across the street, the skittering of litter in the parking lot, sirens and the deep-blue buzz of the hospital itself. When it went off, the summer would reappear, the chirping of birds and the shush of cars on the road beyond the decorative bushes.

KIDNEY BOY

Said I'm not going to make it, and she assured him that he would but heard the truth in his voice and saw it in his eyes. You know how that is, she said. He was seeing what I saw but couldn't tell him.

NOTHING GOOD

Could come from the intimacy of those post-treatment moments, when a patient was disoriented by a joyous sensation of relief, he thought. That was when they did weird shit, reaching out to touch you, saying something about putting you in their will, or even, in some cases, lashing out for no good reason, because you were a bearer of good tidings.

HE RESISTED

Giving her the standard nurse-to-nurse talk about not internalizing the pain of the patients, how they come and go fleetingly. The ones you think are going to live end up dead. The ones you're sure are going to die, who have death in their eyes, end up living, processed out and sent on their merry way. Changing bedpans and lifting armrests and holding shoulders, checking charts, slipping little baggies over the tips of thermometers, inserting I.V. needles. Then the sensation of going outside for a break and seeing that, although inside a patient has just grunted and gone into cardiac arrest with a no-assist order, the sky, filled with clouds and sunlight and birds, is still throwing itself majestically over the world.

SHE CRIED

About Kidney Boy, and he drew her close, giving her a chance to glance down, through the blue light of his shirt, at a switchyard of ridges where the scar opened up into the crater where the frag had gone in.

THE TRAILER

Arrived every few weeks that summer, and they texted each other and met.

ITINERANT LIFE

Following the trailer from one town to the next, staying in budget hotels, watching television alone in the evenings, didn't bother her much, because before Holiday Court she and her mother had travelled around a lot, following one asshole after another, and she got used to it, she said one afternoon, brushing her hair away from her forehead and looking out over the bushes to the kids playing on the ball field across the street and then, turning around quickly, gazing over his shoulder at the hill that climbed past the road in the other direction, across the parking lot, where tombstones rose up into the trees. It seemed pretty typical, putting a graveyard next to a hospital.

THE DEAD

Had names that stuck in the mind, whereas those of the ones who were cured were released, sent back into the clean, raw rotation of the stars, so to speak, he said. There was always some patient in critical condition, doomed and marked terminal on the charts, who overcame the odds and marched out of the ward surrounded by his family, not even waving goodbye, taking a name off into the future.

MARLON

Liked her white arms, and the way her breasts swayed beneath the fabric of her scrubs, and he thought—when she and the trailer were gone—about the way her ass shifted when she walked, throwing a compaction from one side to the other, revealing to him a complication of form that begged to be touched, giving him, during lonely nights in his shitty apartment, something to imagine: falling to his knees and extending his arms out like one of those mythic figures offering a baby to the sun or to God, gently cradling each side of her beautiful bottom.

GRACIE

Admired the bulk of his body and his dark skin and his muscular heft in combination with the way he shifted from foot to foot when he was standing and the way, when he was on the curb smoking, he looked beyond her to some point on the horizon that nobody could see, pulling his long black hair tighter into the regulation ponytail, holding his head high and working his jaw as he talked, letting his upstate intonations enter his voice, and the way he assumed a weird, regal formality, stopping to bow to her as he emerged from the emergency-room doors, sweeping his arm out to the side, looking grim and lonely until he unleashed his smile in a way that seemed vulnerable and tough all at the same time.

SHOSHONE

Folk loved the wolf, he told her one afternoon when she asked him about life in Ely, Nevada. Wolf could bring people back to life but he didn't do it, because there'd be too many people in the world if he did. I'm not sure how the story goes, but it's something like that, he said, and it was about the only thing my mother ever really told me about our people.

HALF-HOUR

Breaks adding up, one after another, over four months.

THE LONELIEST ROAD

In America is Route 50 in Nevada, and it goes through Ely. Driving it's like losing your soul and getting another one, my mom used to say. My father drove out 50 and disappeared for a year and came back saying that he'd never got off it—the road, I mean—and then she left him, or he left her, or they left each other. I've got fifty versions of that story. Another thing she told me was that folks in San Francisco said they had to drive east to get to the West. She had this hangup about being from the West, and then there she was, living in Newburgh, New York.

RIFFING

About the serial-killer nurse, expounding on something he'd read online about this male nurse who admitted to killing patients, mostly in Pennsylvania, adjusting morphine drips and rewriting charts, covering his tracks. By that point she had given him the entire Kidney Boy story, how she'd seen in his eyes that he would commit suicide, even the fact that he'd throw himself from a bridge. A few days later, he told one about his buddy who was killed in Iraq. Same old story, I.E.D., blasting up through the undercarriage, tearing a hole and all of that, except this time it wasn't his arm but his head and upper torso, and the light went out of his eyes.

PLAY IT OUT

She was saying. He was hunching his shoulders, his face buried in his hands. The way I see it, that serial-killer nurse isn't a real killer; he can take or leave the death part, because what he really likes is scoping out the possibilities—you know the ones I'm talking about, the pre-op patients who want you to lend an ear so they can decide that you're gonna be a good-luck charm, taking your hand and complimenting your nursing skills, understanding full well the implications of the coming surgery, whatever. You go in and for a minute, even if you try not to, you feel the life *in your hand* and you become aware that one little fuckup on a chart, or a misreading, and the patient could die. Or when you go in to find balloons and cards tacked to a board and see some little kid—always named Sammy or Annie—with a shaved head and pre-surgery marks and you think, against your will, how fucking easy it would be to save the kid from suffering, he said, looking out over the road, streaming his smoke between his teeth, with his eyes on the horizon and his chin jutting.

ON THE STEPS

Of the trailer a few days later, picking up on the subject of the serial-killer nurse, he began to talk again about the impulse to kill, how he'd learned in Fallujah that impulse equals mess, and how there was a guy in the unit who plugged shots whenever he saw fit, and one day some old lady came around the corner with her hand in the air—we hated corners, he said, which was one reason we hated Fallujah—and this guy in our unit just popped her. When we got close to the body, we saw that she had these arthritic hands, fingers curled, so a hand held up like that might've looked like a gun. But it was really just sloppy shit, the truth.

BEAUTIFUL

Inside that moment—his voice quivering, his eyes welling—the wind was rising and the darker clouds were coming in. His eyes were painfully green as the grief twisted his face and the trees near the road gave off a sugary odor and tenderness formed in the quiet. How long was that moment, held in memory between the two of them for the rest of their lives?

FINALLY

He spoke and said, My grandmother had rheumatoid arthritis, and I used to go with her to Ely, to this clinic where she put her hands into a wax bath while I watched, dipping them in and wincing, at first, until she had blue wax gloves. Then he shook a cigarette from his pack and lit up, and they sat and listened to the sounds of summer, looking over the bushes at the baseball diamond and, beyond it, at the top of the school and the white cupola in the sky. When he spoke again, he explained that the dead lady on the street in Fallujah had had hands just like his grandmother's, and then he began to cry, starting with a single, low gasp and a collapse of his shoulders as he buried his face, and she pulled him close.

ONE

Hopes for the great love born of a common pain, for two united souls sharing grief in long, easy banter while they fend off physical attraction and misread each other until everything seems to change one afternoon, smoking behind the trailer on a particularly rough day—a triaged bus accident that included one double amputee, a burn victim (for him), and (for her) a woman who came in with a story to tell about her previous stones and a time when she was so bad, lying on her side in her living room, bucking in agony, that she begged her husband to kick her, and he did just that, walloping her, and her husband was arrested, of course, but it worked, and the stone passed in her piss. The cops wouldn't listen to her side of the story, though, and her husband ended up in jail. Damn right, Marlon said—and then, just after she finished that story, there was the whoop of a siren and an E.M.S. pulled in and they watched while overhead, from a thin stack on the roof of the hospital, a bloom of smoke emerged into the early-autumnal sky, the incinerated aftermath of old bandages and bloodied towels, afterbirths and whatever else could be burned to save the hospital disposal fees.

ONE AFTERNOON IN SEPTEMBER

He said, I love hearing your stories. I love your stories, too, she said, touching his shoulder.

WE SHOULD GET OUT OF HERE

After this shift, take a drive, he said, shrugging his shoulder toward the emergency entrance, where the orderlies were removing a gurney from a truck, lowering it with a count. And she waited to answer, because she wanted him to beg a little, to hear how much his desire had accrued over the weeks—small hand brushes and gestures, one to the next—and because she took care with matters of the heart, the past having taught her that a hit could come as easily as a kiss.

THEY DROVE

Up the old state road through autumn dusk, talking softly and listening to music as the river appeared and disappeared to the right and she fiddled with the old-radio punch buttons, feeling the mechanism moving the pointer as it slid from station to station.

THEY BOTH FELT

The sensation of going north, while he told stories about growing up, the gangs that ruled the neighborhood, the way they used to play along the river, and then, around the switchbacks of Storm King and passing through the desolation of Newburgh, he said, I think *this* here is probably the loneliest road in America, and they headed out of town, continuing north as the road opened into four lanes and then back to two, skirting old estates and monasteries, until they reached a small hotel up on a berm on the left, painted pink, with a quivering neon sign that said River Rest, something from an old movie.

NO

Wait, before they got to the hotel they stopped at a diner, sharing a meal, and then in the parking lot they smoked and leaned back, gazing up at the stars—and if you'd been looking you would have seen them there and speculated on two people lingering in an upstate parking lot, kissing each other gently, and you would've extrapolated a story from that image.

NO

Wait, there were a lot of other conversations, late in the summer and early in the fall, as they stared out at the road and the ball field and the sky, testing each other, teasing, griping about work and life in general, sharing deeper stories that'll never be recorded, not here, and not in memory, so that later, looking back, it would seem that in the fall, on a cold afternoon, they had both decided on a whim to take the leap, to hook up, to go into the future together, to consummate the hesitant, careful nature of their personalities, because they were both damaged, somehow lost, and sensed and felt—you'd see if you'd been watching—a suddenly deep need for each other.

NO

Wait, go back to the afternoon she told him the Kidney Boy story, to the way that exchange had worked temporally, the things that were withheld and the things that were expressed, the way she told Marlon how she imagined the kid, whose name was Curt, going up to the bridge, standing on the railing and looking straight ahead—at the bend in the river, the beautiful vista. Go back to the way the exchange transpired—almost wordlessly, but not quite—that afternoon between Marlon and Gracie, and how he said “of course,” after she told him Kidney Boy's real name, Curt, and then he laughed and said, All those stoners have short names, like Hank, Curt, Al. How after she'd talked about the broken jaw she abruptly changed the subject to something her dentist had told

her about boys (she said boys) coming into the office on Sunday afternoons with bar-fight jaws, broken teeth. Go back to how, after she'd told Marlon about the dentist, an old couple appeared between the sliding doors and began a slow, shuffling walk across the parking lot, holding each other up, and how he paused (holding off on the nursing lecture) and said, How did Curt die? He said it before she could tell him the fact. Not so much guessing as seeming to have a prophetic insight. And she said, Hey, how'd you know?, and he shrugged and looked away and listened as she explained that Curt had jumped from a bridge, and then, right then, the wind lifted and litter skittered and an E.M.S. came into the emergency bay and across the street there was the high, metallic, and beautiful sound of kids playing before she began to cry.

NO

Wait, go back to the way he emerged from the sliding glass doors in his Army fatigues over his scrubs with his hood pulled up around a face grimly set, his small mouth puckered, as if he were deep in thought, until he got near the trailer and pulled his hood down and shook his head to let his hair out and paused for a moment, extending his arms as if for an embrace, and then said, Heyya, heyya, and gave her a hug while she held the story she wanted to tell him about the crazy old lady up in Poughkeepsie, because she always had one bottled up, at bay, and that was part of the dynamic, the urge to talk to him, and to hear him talk back.

NO

Wait, go back behind the trailer, to that particularly rough day, a triaged bus accident, two D.O.A. and one double amputee, for him, and for her an old man with a stone the size of the Hope Diamond in for the second time, and the lady who argued over her technique with the pounder, giving her grief, and to make up for it decided to tell Gracie her life story, ten stones in five years—was what she said—and a slow passer, taking her time, a regular at the hospital. And then Gracie told Marlon about her mom, about the way her stepfather had beaten them both, and then about Roy, the guy at Holiday Court, this wiry older guy—at least he seemed older to me at the time, she said—who had a motorcycle and took her for rides, and then she stopped speaking and let Marlon see in her face the things she wanted him to see, that she had suffered at the hands of Roy.

NO

Wait, go to the moment when suddenly, out of the blue, a freak snow squall had appeared from a cloudless sky, and he said it was a good omen, and she told him he was full of shit, and they fell into a hysterical laughing fit together as, once again, an E.M.S. came roaring in—siren whooping—as if to counterpoint their joy and delight with the urgency of some other realm, and how that moment, amid the countless others, somehow sealed a fate between them within the shared eternity of those moments.

NO

Wait, go back to that afternoon, when he said, We should get out of this place, or perhaps he said, We should get away from this joint, and shrugged a shoulder back toward the emergency entrance, where—with a clank-and-clattering sound—they were removing a gurney from the truck, lowering it on a count, which was a sign of something horrible, because they only did that for the messed-up cases, the damaged goods, and she waited a few beats to answer Marlon, because she wanted him to say it again, to beg a little bit, to see just how much desire had accrued over the weeks, from one small hand brush to another, from one gesture to the next, because that was all she had in the end: all she had—she sometimes felt—was the small accumulations, one upon the

next, because the past had taught her to take care with all of that, to be frugal with matters of the heart. A hit could come as easily as a kiss. The back of a hand could arrive at a moment's notice. This physics was in her bones, in the way she drew herself slightly away, even now, when he reached out to touch her shoulder. She felt herself—with the breeze blowing her hair around her eyes— withdrawing a little bit from the pliant urgency in his voice when he told her that he just felt like getting away. So she waited until he added, I'm not hitting on you, I'm just proposing a drive up the river, and then they both laughed at that. And she waited a few more beats, and then said, Sure, which was, he thought, the most beautiful word in the world.

SO

Now they were in a bed, in the shadowy hotel light, listening to the occasional car passing on the road.

IN THE SAGGING BED

He heaved into her, lifting himself up on his hands, while she held his shoulders, her fingers sliding around to feel the scar coming down from his neck and channelling out in two lines that then met again around his left nipple to form a craterlike hollow, and she drew on her time in nursing school, testing the tissue where the shrapnel went in and stayed in and burned—he'd later say— phosphorous white and hot enough, thank God, to cauterize the wound and seal off the blood vessels. He thrust down and deep and then eased up as she pushed against him—forgetting his scars—until the two motions spun into what seemed to be an airless freedom. He grunted, and she came, too, her finger flicking.

A SOFT WEeping

Sound—as close to crying as you could get—and when she made that sound he made it, too, and together they were making one sound, and then he rested his weight against her and recalled her hand down there, fluttering, reminding him of the old woman's hand and of his grandmother's, too, because to touch herself she'd had to bend and flex it, and remembering the feeling after the fact he felt sure that he would tell her what had really happened to the old lady in Fallujah, or at least later—much later, years later—he'd see that image and use it to justify having told her about it.

DEEP IN THE NIGHT

He nudged her awake and explained that he was the one who'd gone trigger happy on the old lady in Fallujah, shooting her as she came around the corner on raw impulse instead of thought, taking her out from twenty yards away.

HE CRIED

Against her shoulder as she said, softly, It's all right, Marlon, you're here now and it's going to work out, you're a damn good nurse, and then it seemed as if all she had ever learned on the job came into play as she spoke soothingly to him, making a gentle patting motion on his back, the kind of gesture you'd use to calm a baby at night—a gentle repeated pat, not too soft and not too hard.

SO THAT

The deepest enigmatic meaning would seem to stay around that image, not just of the two of them crying together but also of the hand itself, as it fluttered alone, which had led to his admission, and for her that image would hold another meaning, because she would remember it, too, vaguely, and replicate the motion countless times over the years, giving herself pleasure, just as she'd often backtrack through her memory of that summer and fall, drawing on the random moments, trying to find the origin point of their love. ♦

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David Means has written several books, including "Hystopia," a novel, and the short-story collection "Instructions for a Funeral."