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NON-FICTION | FALL 2021

## First Will and Testament

By Anna Stacy

The summer I was 19, I lived in a small first floor apartment in Pasadena, on a magnolia-lined street. It was the first apartment I had ever rented: there was no furniture, nothing in the room but a handful of wire hangers, and the air conditioner spewed a hot dust whenever it was on. I found a futon, and a fan, and a milk crate to use as a bedside table. My roommate had a large TV in the living room and told me I could use it if I agreed to feed his sourdough starter when he was away. This, I agreed, was a fair arrangement.

The apartment was a few blocks away from a lab where I worked, and the walk there was sublime. I passed flowers in full bloom, a fountain filled to bursting, a pond with turtles basking on the rocks, rows of towering buildings, California-old. And all the while, the sun blazed down and made it shine and shine. Some days, it felt like torture sometimes to enter that dark building, work at the computer in that windowless room with the hum of the refrigerator that stored sections of monkey brains, sliced like deli meat.

Once a week, I'd venture out in the other direction, past the magnolias, past the houses, past the church that looks exactly like a chicken's face, the *In-N-Out* shrouded in a cloud of weed, the bus stop with the movie poster four years late. The mountains far away would shimmer like a mirage, like something boiling, like a spell. I'd bring along my large tote bag and walk, feeling my skin toast like a soft-shelled nut.

And there, along the strip mall, between the furniture store and the coffee shop, stood the recruiter in a tight black shirt and khaki cargo pants. The sign reading "Army Recruiting Center" was, inappropriately, a Navy blue, the letters displayed in a burly stencil font. The recruiter always recognized me. I never caught his name.

"Hey!" he'd call. "Don't you want to travel? Make a difference? Get paid?"

Most days I'd walk past without a word. Sometimes I'd offer a tight, polite smile, the way that girls are taught to do, the way that women forget to unlearn. Sometimes I'd ignore him altogether, as if he were a part of the building itself. But sometimes—the lonely days, the days when I really was 19—I'd listen to what he had to say with a sarcastic curiosity.

"Don't you want to travel? Make a difference? Get paid?" "Of course," I'd reply. "But I don't want to die." The recruiter would shake his head with a smile. "That doesn't always happen." I'd shake my head right back, then continue on to the grocery store. On my way home, I'd take the bus.

A few months later, in the autumn when I was 19, I applied to medical school. I applied through an early assurance program for undergraduates with significant interests outside of

medicine, and I thought, *Hey, that's me!* At my interview, the admissions officers talked about how a career in medicine would allow us to heal in ways both big and small, to advocate for those who lack a voice. All the loud and exciting parts of being a doctor: make-a-difference, change-the-world. I remember feeling dizzy with all the possibility — the chance to cure, and save, and make people live! It was noble, and it was proud.

I never thought, not even once, that I might die because of it.

Last year, in April, in the spring when I was 25, I sat down at my desk early one morning. I had been volunteering at the hospital for a week. In that time, I had heard the break room jokes morph from “When this is over, the bridge of my nose is going to be permanently flat from these damn masks” to “If you take the last muffin, I swear to god I’m writing you out of my will.” We all loved joking about our wills —writing them, amending them, burning them, hiding them. I got the sense that others actually had written up their wills. I overheard two residents chatting quietly in the emergency room, their heads down, their tired eyes just visible behind their face shields. They had their phones out — one said to the other, “Okay, I just sent it to you. If something happens, send that to Mark, okay?”

So, I sat down to write mine.

I had no idea what to include. I don’t have that much stuff. But I have furniture, now — a bed frame, not a futon. An air conditioner that works. A bookshelf full to bursting, titles crammed in sideways and diagonal like the tenants of my apartment building. These, I wrote, would go to my roommate, to distribute to our friends as she saw fit. Same with my clothes: whatever people like, whatever’s in their size. My brother would get my instruments. And whatever was in my bank account was to be split amongst my friends to help pay off their student loans, which wasn’t much but I’d hoped would help.

I folded this up — handwritten, as neatly as my almost-doctor handwriting would allow — and put it in an envelope.

Each morning before I set off for the hospital, I would leave the envelope on my desk, as plainly as I could. Just in case my roommate would need to find it. I did this for months.

Shed my scrubs on the landing. Washed my hands until they bled.

Now I am 26, and it is spring again. The bridge of my nose is fine, if sore. My hands are chapped. My heart is full.

That 19-year-old had no idea what she was signing up for. I hope wherever she is, that she is well.

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**Anna Stacy (they/she) is an actor, writer, medical student, and multi-tasker from New York. Their writing has appeared in Calyx, Perennial Press, the Santa Fe Writers Project Quarterly and Academic Emergency Medicine, as well as on-screen in the award-winning series Dead-Enders. As an MS4 at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, Stacy's focus is on access to care in Emergency Medicine.**

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