

Sky

By Denise Napoli Long

William Duffy was a frequent flyer in the ER, an alcoholic homeless man. We saw him once or twice a month. The story this time was that someone found him on the side of the road, with his head on the curb, like a pillow. I was his nurse.

“Hi, Willy,” I said.

He nodded regally from the gurney in the hallway, the way that drunks do, a powerful but benign king. I was his faithful servant.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Well, I had a few beers.” He spoke each word carefully, particularly, like it might break. “I did nothing wrong.”

Someone in triage had put a sheet over him. I pulled it away. His khaki shorts were stained dark brown. The stench of shit bloomed like a rose.

“Did you fall down?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“Did you hit your head?”

“My darling,” he said, and took my gloved hand in both of his, like a lover. He stared into my eyes. His were surprisingly, startlingly blue. They reminded me of a sky I once knew, lying in a hammock on a farm in Minnesota, years and years ago and a thousand miles away. A blue that shamed you.

“They’re going to do a CT scan,” I said. “On your head.”

“My head?” He leaned his face down to my glove and kissed it. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

The transport guy walked up and pointed. “This the guy who is going to CT?”

“It is,” I said. I pulled my hand away.

“I will never forget you,” he said.

“I’ll see you when it’s done,” I told him. And then, to the transport guy, I said, “Be careful. He’s covered in shit.”

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Ten minutes later there was a page over the intercom. Code Blue, CT scan.

Two nurses and one doctor from my section went running, the doc yelling, “That’s fucking Willy!” I was stuck in a room with a demented old lady who would not get back in the bed, who kept insisting that a train was coming and she was going to miss it. “My mother is waiting, you bitch!” she yelled. She was 93 years old.

They worked on Willy for almost an hour. I couldn’t get there—I couldn’t leave the demented lady. They banged on his chest and pushed drugs in his arms and stuck a tube down his throat to try and bring him back, but they couldn’t. There was a bleed in his brain, it turned out. He hit his head just one too many times.

When my shift was over, at 7 a.m., I got in my car and drove down to the marina. I parked at the water’s edge, looking for sky. The gray morning held itself up over the empty slips like a sheet over a gurney. I cried and cried.

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