Hospitals Are Cold

The consistent beep of the ECG machine plays in perfect rhythm with my hand’s nervous tick. My fingers trace the design in the hard hospital chair as my mind spins. I sit alone next to his bed with the results in my hand, an 8”x11” sheet with a thousand words on it. The top of the paper said that I was an organ match for him- I wish it didn't. I don’t want to look up. I don’t want to stare at him lying there, tube in his mouth. I can’t look up, so I dig holes in my cuticles instead.

“It’s a bad habit, babe.”

I hear his voice in my head, all those times he would hold my hands just to stop me from ripping at them. A nurse knocks on the door; she doesn't speak, but I know what she’s asking.

“I need a couple more minutes,” I say. She glances at her watch, looks back up at me, and nods as she leaves the room. My eyes fall back to my fingers.

His room is bright, but the bad kind of bright that gives you a headache. Not the glow of the warm sun, but the harsh, unnatural light of fluorescents. I wish there was a window in here. I want to feel the sun. A smile peaks through my clenched face as I think about the first date we went on, the first time he held my hand. My anxious nature seemed to fill the whole day, but he wasn't phased by my nerves. Owen was rambunctiously laughing at some poster on the street when his hand reached for mine. The touch of his hand on me, the warm sun shining on us, it was all so perfect; so warm. But it’s cold in this room. This whole day is cold.

The sound of Owen’s mom crying in the hallway pierces my ears, so I look over. Two doctors stand in front of her, spouting medical terms that I’ve heard before, his kidney is failing. The last time we were here we had just gotten together and he was out of the hospital within a few days, but I know this is different. His mother’s hopeless teary eyes go cold as she looks at me. Her jaw tightened. She waves me over and reluctantly I go.

“What the hell happened Theo?”

“I don't- I don't know he just...just collapsed.”

Her voice roared like lion protecting her young, “What do you mean he just collapsed? What did you do to him?”

“I didn’t do anything to him! This wasn't my fault. He just- I didn’t do anything!”

The Doctor interrupts all the yelling. I guess it’s not very peaceful for all the other families trying to survive just down the hall from us.

“Look, this is no one's fault. This is not irregular with patients like Owen. We knew this was a possibility when we first started treatment, we just didn't know when. You two fighting is not going to help him right now.”

My eyes look at the floor as her’s lock on me. Us fighting won’t help him, but a kidney would, my kidney would; his mom knows it, I know it, the doctor knows it, but no one says it. He’s on the list so he’ll get one eventually, I suppose. Regardless, I can’t stand here, knowing they’re watching me. Wondering what I’ll do. I can feel his mom’s never-ending stare. I’m sure she just wants to scream the words out, are you gonna save my son or not. I tug on every piece of clothing on my body, hoping if I look busy enough she won't ask me.

“I’m gonna get some water,” I say as I start to walk away. I know that's not what she was hoping I was going to say when I opened my mouth, but I need to not be standing with her anymore. Starting down a random hall I go back to ripping my nails. I walk around for awhile, taking as small of steps as I possibly can and peering into other people's rooms. There are a husband and wife that look like they just got good news, and another woman in the waiting room crying. A shiver runs down my back as I watch the bright smiles on the couple's faces light up this place, and the pain on the woman's’ bring it back down to dark.

There is a vending machine at the end of the hallway that I find Gatorade in.

        Not a significant source of vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, or iron.

Well, yeah duh. I read all the nutrient facts before I take one sip. I don’t really care that there is 160 mg of sodium in it, but Owen would. Before I know it I have gulped down almost the whole bottle, realizing that I hadn't actually had anything to drink today or eat for that matter.

Drink in hand, my back slides down the cold concrete wall ‘til I hit the floor and ponder the events that would follow if I donate. There goes my college hockey scholarship, there goes dreaming of the NHL, there goes going to college at all. Everything I want will be gone. Can I actually be thinking about this? Can I actually be prioritizing my college over Owen’s life? I didn't realize I was this shitty of a person. But why am I shitty for wanting something? For wanting to pursue the dream I have had since I was seven. Every practice, every game, every sacrifice of my parents time to watch me, every injury and recovery, wasted. That’s eleven years of my life, for nothing. No, not for nothing, for Owen. If this happened a week ago, maybe I would be less hesitant. But it didn't, it happened now, and now is clouded with the instant replays in my mind of him kissing Carter.

Owen and I met Carter at accepted students day at the University of Colorado. You could see it in their eyes, they just clicked. All of the sudden I was the third wheel, watching the guy I love fall in love with someone else. He told me it was nothing, and I wanted to believe him. I told myself I believed him. It was about a week ago. I was late for studying with him for the third time in a row. He was mad, and Carter was there, and it just “happened”. His words. At least he told me, I guess? But telling me didn't make it feel better. I wasn’t able to look at him for a few days. Every time I did it just stung. I kept seeing them together in my head and only got more clear when I looked at him. Today was the first time we hung out since then. He came over early this morning and we were trying to talk about it when he fell to the floor. I still can’t believe how loud his body hitting the ground was. I can’t get the damn sound out of my head. It just plays on repeat like a haunting song. The sight of his eyes rolling back into his head, it’s painted on the back of my eyelids, so I don’t dare close them.

It was all so good for so long. We’ve been dating for a year next Tuesday. Did I start to distance myself? Did I do this? Did my pulling away push Owen into him? His cheating seems both insignificant and also everything right now. I think about the fight we had and the week I wasted not speaking to him, and now, now I might not get a chance to...an irruption of tears promptly shuts off my thoughts. I quickly harden my face and wipe them off my cheeks. I can’t seem to sit still anymore; like every nerve in my body is about to explode so I jump to feet, walking back and forth in the hall. I expect people to stare at my sweaty, shaking, pacing body but no one does. I guess this sight is pretty usual in a hospital.

The only person that could help me figure out what to do is lying unconscious. I wish I could talk to him, he would know what I should do. He would hold my hand and support me in whatever I did. He would never ask me to save him, but I would if he looked at me like he does, no one can turn down those blue eyes. He’s my best friend, my soulmate, but what if I’m not his? What if I do this, and he wakes up, and then we’re over. Just like that. He could not be in love with me anymore. He would go to college and live his life and I'll be here, not living mine. Not living mine because I gave him mine. But he is my best friend and he has been for years. How could I live without him? I can’t just go on with my life knowing that he is sitting somewhere, suffering. The knowledge that he would be lying here all the time, struggling to breathe and walk on his own, brings me to tears again. I can actually feel my heart beating in my hands as I clenched them together.

Slowly, I make my way back to his room. I pass his mother in the hallway but I don't look at her. It feels even colder in here then it was before. If I knew it was going to be this cold I would have brought a sweatshirt. Owen would be cold right now, he’s always cold, even on a hot day. I finally wrap my hand around his left one. For the first time all day, my mind is clear. The touch of his hand takes away the panic that has been floating over me for the past few hours. I can breathe again. I hold him tighter. As empty as my thoughts are, tears continue to stream down my face and this time I cannot control it. This isn’t fair, none of this is fair. Seventeen is too young to decide this-it isn’t fair to Owen and it isn’t fair to me. My hand involuntarily brushes his hair back as I kiss check and lay my forehead on his.

“I’m so sorry.”

I walk out of his room and towards the big sliding doors. His mom calls out to me, screaming, yelling my name. But for once the screeching pain in her voice does not stop my feet from moving, towards the neon exit sign. The sun hits me as I step outside. The doors have not closed behind me so I can still hear his mother’s cries, but the warmth of July on my face fades the sound away.