

My World

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I've got the whole world in my hands, today. *My* whole world, that is. Two days ago, my son Gabe was born, but he had a terrible disease. The flap of his voice box was soft and floppy, which meant that it blocked his airways and made it difficult to breathe. He has been on the ventilator since then, the mask covering his tiny face, pumping oxygen into a body that cannot survive on its own. Today I will operate on him in the theatre, because when it comes to my world, I cannot trust it to anyone else, I just cannot.

I walk through the stark white corridors, and the harsh lighting seems to illuminate everything, filling every nook and cranny of the hallway, leaving no place for mercy, no place for failure. I wash my trembling hands in the sink outside the operation booth, and then enter the room in which my son's fate will be decided. By me. Whether I like it or not. I pull the surgical gloves over my hands. My hands, which have served me invariably during my career, helped me to survive and provide for myself. They won't fail me today. They can't. I get the tools for the surgery sanitized and ready, and look up as my assistant, Nurse Parker, joins me.

"Big day, huh?" he says with a weak attempt at a smile. I try to return the gesture, but I'm sure my smile looks even more nervous than his.

For the first time since I have entered the room, I look at Gabe. At my son. His vulnerable body, still under the effects of the anesthesia, his breaths come and go in the same rasps as they did two days ago.

I gather my strength, and call out, “Ready for the procedure?”

From behind a glass partition, we see the faint outline of a thumbs up, and a voice replies, “Permission to start. Good luck, Doctor”

“Okay, here we go...” I mutter under my breath, apprehensively. My hands are slick with sweat right now. My assistant nods and the operation starts.

I pick up my tools with shaking hands, to make an incision above the jugular. My hands reach out, as if of their own accord, and the knife comes away red with blood. I give it to my assistant, who wipes it with an antiseptic wipe and puts it back on the cart. I reach in with another tool. Steady... steady...steady...

My vision tunnels and a sudden nervous movement make my hand jump... sideways... straight into Gabe’s throat. I stand stock-still in shock as I watch the red liquid of life spurt from my son’s throat. My world is dying. And it’s my fault.

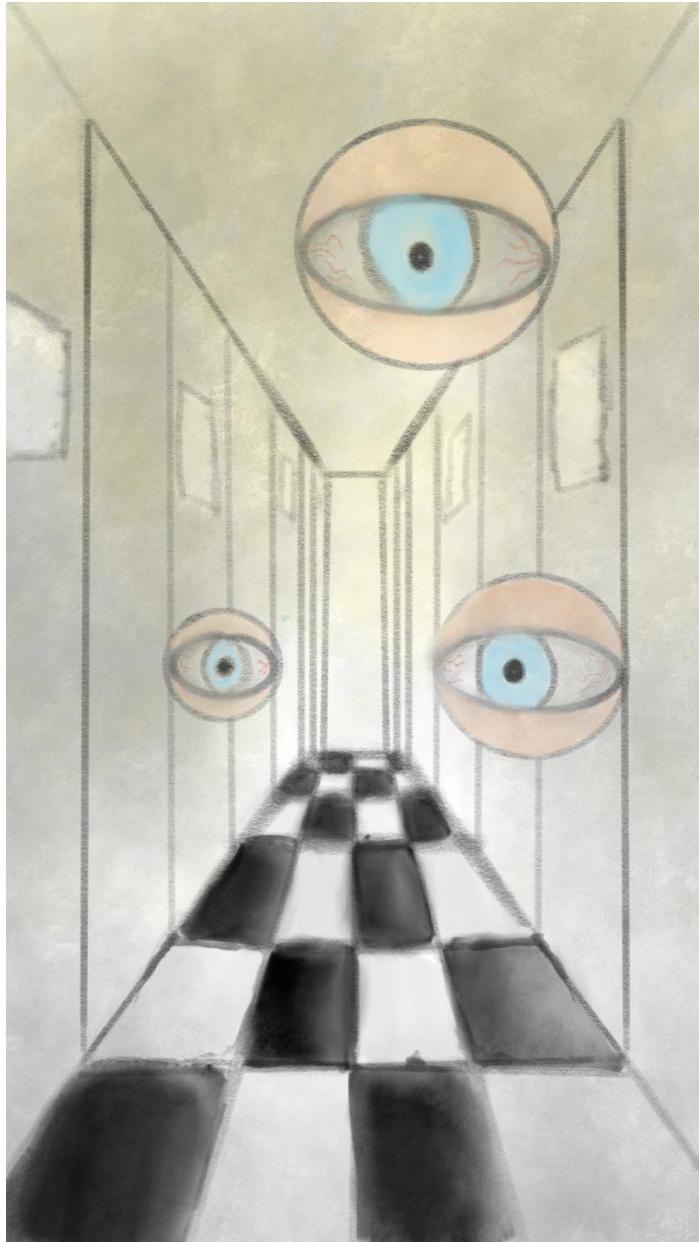
One hour later...

I sit outside the operation theatre; body slumped against the chair like a body in a casket. There is numbness in my body, spreading through my chest like cold fire, filling my heart with a heaviness that bears down on me. I barely register the mass of bodies rushing into the room after I had decided my son’s fate; doctors and nurses running in to try to save the only thing worth saving: Gabe. It should have been me, should have been me. A nurse comes out of the theatre looking calm until her frantic eyes find mine. “He is alive for now, but we will need a much higher level of expertise to deal with this situation.”

Her movements, like all nurses’, are designed to be sympathetic, but I know she blames me completely for what happened.

She turns around to walk back down the hallway, and then the guilt comes. It presses at me from all sides, crushes me, consumes me, makes me sink down to my knees. I can’t handle it. My sight starts to turn black at the edges, spreading inwards like a stain of ink on a white page. My vision goes blank, and I lose consciousness.

I am told it has been three days since I collapsed, hit my head on the floor and contracted a concussion, but the first thought on my mind is, “Gabe?” I say it out loud.



The man sitting across from me looks up and says, “He is in the ward down the hallway. We had to put him on the ventilator again, but he’s pulling through, for the moment” Again, I am sure he gives me that look, the look that the nurse also gave me: the look that blames everything on me. Again, the guilt and sadness and worry threaten to crash down on me. But I have to be strong, for Gabe; For my world. I nod to the doctor, not trusting myself to speak, and turn my head away so he can’t see my tears.

I am discharged from my hospital room after two hours of recovering; of thinking of Gabe. I sprint down the hallway, and take the elevator to the ground floor. I need to find Gabe. The hospital keeps all the names of its patients in a log file on the main

database, located in the reception area. The elevator doors open, and I stumble out onto the ground floor. When I get to the reception desk, the secretary looks up at me from behind her glasses. “Madam? Are you alright? You seem a little out of breath.”

I reply, “I’m fine; I need to know the location of my son, Gabe. He was admitted to the ICU three days ago.”

“Your full name please?” the secretary asks.

“Doctor Hannah Paige,” I answer.

At my name, her eyes widen, and she looks down for a bit; to hide the look on her face, the only look that anyone has given me since the day I failed the operation. “I don’t think that I am allowed to give you that information.”

Of course! What else did I expect? “Please, this is very important. Gabe means everything to me!” She must see the truth of it in my eyes; a doctor’s concern for her patient, a mother’s love for her child.

“I know how vital this is for you. Gabe Paige is in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. First floor, bed number 144,” she glances around as if someone will hear our exchange of information.

As much as I would like to, I do not have any time to thank her. Shooting her a grateful look, I hurry back towards the elevator.

The doors open again, onto the first floor this time, and I run out into the hallway. Gabe is in the NICU. First floor, forty fourth bed. As I sprint down the hallway, I can swear that everyone I pass gives me the look, the look of shame. I avoid the million, searching, hungry eyes and keep going.

I reach the care unit almost immediately. I am now standing in front of a foggy white screen, which obscures my view of anything going on inside. The curtain has the numbers 44 printed on it. I pull it back. He is lying on a bed that is too big for his size, and attached to him is a machine that is too big for his size. His closed eyes and hairless body squirm around, struggling to take in the air that he has been provided; and his every movement sends daggers through my heart. I want to pick him up, but I don’t dare touch him, not after what just happened. Not after I decided his fate.

I cannot wait any longer or I will go insane. I need to do something, anything. I cast a desperate look at the doctor, who raises his eyes up to mine. He must see the agonized look in my eyes as he comes nearer to reassure me.

“It’s going to be alright. We’ll call a surgeon, and he will make your child all better. He will survive. Trust us.”

And that is when I understand, that maybe the reason the operation failed in the first place was because of my stubbornness, my unwillingness to let anyone else touch my child. Still, it would not be right, it can not be right, to just abandon Gabe when he needs me the most.

“I need to operate on him again, doctor. Please, I have to do this. I need to be the one who saves him.”

He heads over to the intercom, and with a heavy shift of my heart, I realize that he is going to call the security on me. I will always be remembered only as the crazy lady who tried to kill her son. His fingers lift up the receiver...he dials the number for the lobby reception area. My whole body shudders in relief as he says, “Nurse Parker, please come to Room 144 and escort Doctor Paige to the operation theatre please. Yes, I know. No. Thank you.” The doctor turns to me with a smile on his face, “Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer. My words come out unsteady and watery. He nods and exits the room.

We enter a different theatre than before, but it looks the same. The guilt and the sadness and the worry threaten to break out of the dam of my brain; polluted water in the ocean of my thoughts. Be strong for Gabe; for Gabe. I shake myself out of my spiral of thoughts and turn around, where Parker is standing, looking at me expectantly. “Do you need help?” he asks.

This was the mistake I made last time. “Yes,” I answer.

For the last time, I force down my feelings, bury them deep in the ground, shut them off and lock them behind me. I approach the operating table, and we start our work, rerolling the dice.

My hands move with years of practice, patience, expertise. This is a skill I have learnt, to make my hands the extensions of my brain. They do the work for me. The tools are picked up from the table and returned, red with life. Before I know it, it's done. I did it.

He survived. He survived. The dam breaks. Tears of guilt, of sadness, of joy, spill out of the sides as I think that everything will be alright, he will be alright.

My world is safe.

