Fourteen Stories

Doctors, Patients, and Other Strangers

By Jay Baruch

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For Jen and Daniel

A debt of gratitude to Walter James Miller and Madeleine Beckman

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People jump wide of the vomit on the ER floor. "Ugh," someone yelps; others shield their eyes. Morris wants a closer look. He pulls on the black-framed bifocals that hang from his turkey neck, leans on his mop, crouches low until his knees crinkle. He's certain now: snow peas and baby shrimp. He glowers at the intern, who's complaining to a nurse. "Clyde did this," says the intern, pointing to the homeless snooring on a rusty stretcher nearby, in a cubicle where no one has bothered to draw the curtain. "It's too good a meal," Morris announces, shaking his head. "This is yuppy puke." Morris knows he sounds overly serious, like a salty detective, but Clyde is an ER frequent flyer who prefers alcohol to shellfish.

The intern's lips tighten against his white teeth. "And you are?" he asks.

Morris pushes himself upright, archingly, making the most of his 5 feet 8 inches. He spreads his arms, draws attention to his gray uniform. "I'm the night-shift janitor."

"Ah," says the intern, as if nothing more needed to be stated.

Head down, Morris diligently mops up the mess, regret in his strokes as the evidence vanishes. Once finished, he stacks bricks of new paper towels in his once muscular arms and makes the rounds restocking dispensers. Morris roams the ER freely, his presence both obvious and invisible, like the walls. Occasionally, someone says "hi" with a bemused grin, or "what's up" and doesn't wait for the answer. Not one "welcome back," though. His wife, Tess, has recently died. This evening is his first shift as a widower.

Because he considered Tess his counterpart, his life has now taken on a steep tilt. She worked as a school librarian. She believed children were containers of promise and hope, and she took their responsibility to inspire them very seriously. When she read Dr. Seuss, the kids sat starstruck, cross-legged and barely breathing; she looked deeply into each set of eyes, not having to read the words because they were engrained in her head. When the doctors described the infecting bacteria as resistant to the many antibiotics they'd tried, she was stronger than he. She responded in a weak whisper. "Resistant? Like hippies?" She winked at Morris. "In my lungs/in my pee/in my blood/they won't let me be."

From the stair across from Clyde's stretcher, Morris watches him sleep. Privacy is an illusion in the ER, Morris thinks guiltily, aware of what he's doing. He tugs on the curtain to close it. The overhead track rattles when he does, and Clyde snaps awake.

"Who's there?" Clyde growls, hugging a plastic Gap bag stuffed with his belongings. Morris jumps away. Clyde throws off the thin white sheet. His dark hound-dog eyes bulge. His jeans are soaked with piss. His fingers lap the blotch from his crotch and inner thigh. Their eyes lock. "Who did this?" Clyde screams. People wearing scrubs and white coats pass by. They shoot him a glance but don't stop.

The intern rushes over. "What now, Clyde?" he asks.

"Nothing," says Clyde, scrambling back under the white sheet. Outside, a snowstorm rages. Clyde wants to stay the night, to be forgotten until morning.

The intern finds Clyde's waist and counts his pulse. "You're looking better."

"I'm beyond better," Clyde says, nervously picking at a scab on his sunburned nose. "I'm in withdrawal."

The intern shines a penlight into Clyde's darting eyes. "You're still drunk. How can you be in withdrawal?"

"Not drunk enough," says Clyde, proudly.

The intern raises Clyde's dirt-creased hands, palms down, and contemplates the tremors. Morris shakes his head. Even he knows to check for tongue fasciculations. They can't be faked as easily as tremulous hands.

The intern scans the ER. Patients on stretchers hug both sides of the hallway; friends and family, nervous and petulant, stiffly stand guard. "I'll give you something to calm you down," he tells Clyde, "and check on you in a few hours."

Clyde sighs, nestles beneath the sheet. Morris slams the towel dispenser closed, sniffing, impressed with Clyde's performance. Clyde could also roll his eyes high into his head so it appeared his sockets were filled with ping-pong balls. This singular talent always earned him an ambulance ride to the ER during bitter New York winters.

The sharps box is oversuffed. A nest of bloody needles blocks the narrow mouth from sliding closed. Morris cringes. The sharps box is a hard plastic container that should never be filled beyond the three-quarter mark. Needles, scalpels, and syringes are dispensed there so others don't get accidentally pricked and possibly infected. Ever since Tess fell ill, Morris dreads this task. He suspects he
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may have carried the infection home with him, acquired perhaps from chores such as this one; no one believes a healthy fifty-year-old woman contracted outlaw microbes from *The Cat in the Hat*.

Clyde calls Morris in a raspy whisper. “Where have you been? I missed you.”

This saddens Morris. Only Clyde had noticed that he’s been gone for four weeks.

“Morris!” Clyde calls louder. “Snake me a meal.”

“Not now,” he says, pinching each needle and dropping it to the bottom of an empty sharps box at his feet. IV needles, butterfly needles, thread-thin insulin needles.

“C’mon, Morris.”

“Darn it!” Morris curses under his breath. He rips off the glove, rubs his palm.

“Careful!” warns Clyde. “There’s nasty shit in those needles.”

Morris examines the skin. No puncture marks, no blood; only shell-hard calluses. His pale blue eyes glaze over. He squeezes his hands into new latex gloves. Double-gloving doesn’t stop the memories from flooding his head. “How is it that I’m not sick?” Morris had asked the infectious disease doctor. The sten woman removed her round eyeglasses, rubbed tired eyes that had been mournfully focused onto Tess, by now comatose, supported by a ventilator. “Consider yourself lucky.”

Where is this luck? Morris asks himself. He hopes Tess will somehow drop clues for him. In case she does, Morris wants to make certain she’ll find him. He follows the same routine as when she was alive. He walks to work through Washington Square Park. He stops at Kie’s on the way home, orders barley soup and picks up the *Daily News*. He fills the coffeemaker with Maxwell House, Tess’s favorite, as if she’s still asleep in their bed, waiting to be waked with a kiss, the beginning of her day marking the end of his. Be grateful that you’re alive, Morris tells himself. But he feels far from lucky. He transfers enough needles so the lid can be securely closed, the infectious threat locked away, and with a pang of jealousy watches how easily Clyde drifts back to sleep.

Morris trudges about refilling each liquid soap dispenser. Strangely, the gallon jug feels heavier after each stop. His body tells him it must be getting late. He catches the intern nudging Clyde awake. “It’s 4 A.M., time for your road test.”

Morris stops what he’s doing. He wants to watch. The road test involves walking the crowded hallway without stumbling. Hardened alcoholics require a measure of alcohol in their bodies to idle smoothly. Sometimes when the level in their blood drops to what the law considers safe, they’ll shake and sweat and go into withdrawal, which can lead to DTs and death. Knowing when to discharge these patients requires keen attention completely sober, only sober enough to walk steadily and confidently, to ER and negotiate the two blocks to the treatment center. “How about breakfast?” Clyde asks.

The intern scratches his golden hair. “Let’s go.”

Morris moves from sink to sink. The sink with Clyde.

“I’m only a janitor, remember,” Morris says.

“But it seems you’re friends.”

“What makes you think that?” asks Morris.

“I’ve seen you talking.”

“Do you consider everyone you talk to Clyde was looking toward them, wearing a suit.”

“He won’t leave unless I give him bread.”

“Then feed him.”

The intern breathes fast. “There’s not the ER.”

Morris hands the intern a paper towel, dotting his forehead. “I don’t see abuse. I don’t see abuse to me.”

“I don’t want to feed him. It will encourage dysrhythmia.”

Morris slides his bifocals to the tip of his nose, shakes his head. He gave the same disapproving look at him for letting the doctors know more the doctors could do. “Stop torturing me and get back to work.”

Clyde stirs, as if the doctors have started the thing. He watches the intern open the door, empty out the trash, start off. Clyde still refuses to get off the stretch. He lunes for the sheet to notice. “Don’t just scream the same thing.”

Morris and the intern escort Clyde down through a tunnel of whistles and stares. T1 people aggressively pinch their noses. Clyde’s face slung low. “Let me go,” he says out the co
discharge these patients requires keen and delicate judgment. You don’t want them completely sober, only sober enough. If the slurred speech improves, if they can walk steadily and confidently, they’re considered ready to leave the ER and negotiate the two blocks to the liquor store.

“How about breakfast?” Clyde asks.

The intern scratches his golden hair. It looks stylish even when mussed.

“Let’s go.”

Morris moves from sink to sink. The intern stops him, asks if he’ll speak with Clyde.

“I’m only a janitor, remember,” Morris answers acidly. “Get someone else.”

“But it seems you’re friends.”

“What makes you think that?” asks Morris, continuing his work.

“I’ve seen you talking.”

“Do you consider everyone you talk to a friend?” Morris asks, noticing that Clyde was looking toward them, wearing a quizzical expression.

“He won’t leave unless I give him breakfast.”

“Then feed him.”

The intern breathes fast. “There’s nothing wrong with him. He’s abusing the ER.”

Morris hands the intern a paper towel, gestures for him to wipe the sweat dotting his forehead. “I don’t see abuse. The ER doesn’t look black and blue to me.”

“I don’t want to feed him. It will encourage him to come back.”

Morris slips his bifocals to the tip of his nose, takes a hard look at the intern’s face, shakes his head. He gave the same disapproving look to his daughter. She screamed at him for letting the doctors kill Tess, though there was nothing more the doctors could do. “Stop torturing her,” he finally told them. “She wouldn’t have wanted this.” Now, while the intern contemplates strategy, appearing as wounded and perplexed as his daughter did, Morris slips Clyde a cheese sandwich on the sly, like the drug dealers he notices in Washington Square Park, then begins emptying trash baskets.

Clyde still refuses to get off the stretcher. The intern, now indignant, hoists him upright. Clyde lunges for the sheet but the intern yanks him forward. He notices Morris looking on. “Don’t just stand there,” he says. Clyde’s wide eyes scream the same thing.

Morris and the intern escort Clyde down the busy hallway, arm and arm, through a tunnel of whispers and stares. The urine has fermented for a few hours. People aggressively pinch their noses. Clyde shuffles his feet, knees crossed, head slung low. “Let me go,” he says out the corner of his cracked lips.
"Keep moving," warns the intern.
"Morris?" Clyde hisses.
Morris’s tight hold on Clyde slows the procession. For years he’s observed this ritual, but he’s unprepared for the wall of eyes, the torch stares, the shame. The walk is a ruse, he realizes. It doesn’t test whether patients are sober enough to leave the ER. It’s a parting dose of humiliation to deter them from coming back. He squeezes Clyde’s arm. It’s unclear who needs holding up. He held on to the doctor when asked if Tess would have wanted “aggressive measures.”

What did he know? She rescued ladybugs that wandered in from their fire escape garden, gave pesky flies an open window and not a swat with a rolled magazine. Clyde is silent: the only sound is the shush, shush of duct tape patching his socks. Blown light bulbs darken the furthest end of the hallway. They make a hairpin turn, pass through the harsh, whispering crowd one more time.

"Good job," the intern declares buoyantly. "You’re ready to fly solo."
Clyde breaks away, rushes to his stretcher, shuts the curtain. When he re-appears, the white sheet is swathed around his waist. Holding his bag, Clyde walks slightly bent toward the exit sign. The glass doors part. Morris watches Clyde get swallowed by tongues of swirling snow.

"He’ll freeze," Morris tells the intern, who gives him a dismissive look.
"It’s an ER, not a bed and breakfast."
Morris listens to doctors talk about exciting cases, the “great saves.” But caring for Clyde didn’t make them feel good. The doctors said letting Tess die was the right move. But they were stumped, frustrated, and perhaps relieved to finally see her go.
Morris gets his mop, wheels over the bucket, starts cleaning around Clyde’s abandoned stretcher. He finds a puddle of urine.

"Who did this?" asks Morris. He waits for a response. Nothing.

An hour later, the medics wheel Clyde back into the ER. He sits high in the stretcher, beaming. "You liquored up already?" the intern asks.
Clyde blows a laugh. "I’m back for breakfast."

"No food. Forget it." He waves Morris over. "Make Clyde disappear."

"Do it yourself. Get your own hands dirty."

To Morris’s surprise, the intern abruptly steers Clyde to a spot just to the side of the sliding glass doors, as if being left curbside, free for anyone who wanted him. Morris watches Clyde lay his pink, wind-chilled cheeks against the pockmarked wall. He walks over, mop in hand. He looks around. Certain no one is watching, he cuffs Clyde across the back of the head.

"What the hell?" says Clyde, one eyebrow arching.

"You pissed on the floor. Like a dog."

"You helped that kid walk me like a dog."
Morris swallows hard. "You pissed in my pants."
Clyde stutters, then stops and lowers his head. "I pissed my pants, Morris. I’m a man," Clyde rifles through his bag. "Obi bottle. Take it."
Morris turns the bottle upside down. It’s in his chest. He relaxes enough to recognize the decision to let her die won’t go away. The decision, but the reasoning behind it or was it a self-conscious attempt to impress was an educated man capable of making it but part of him doesn’t want to find a solution in the immediate future anyhow. The doubt tormented him. E
er.

Morris can’t confess this to Clyde, he returns the bottle of Obi. "Put it back."
Clyde wearily straddles the stretcher: crust the crotch of his jeans. The stench the intern, loud so everyone could hear it.
The intern strides toward them, face red. He bites his lip, rubs his temples. "I don’t like Clyde’s face explodes. "Game?" He slams into the glass doors to the ER. "What."

"You pretend you’re sick. I pretend I can bring it quickly now. He curses himself, turns, walks away.


"Go, I don’t need you," Clyde screams. This job is crazy, Morris thinks. But refused it. He knew he’d probably be here for patients who decide 3 A.M. is the perfect time to show his back examined.
Morris reaches for his mop. Clyde says:
"You back tonight?"
Morris yanks himself free. "I need to fi
“You helped that kid walk me like a dog,” he snaps.
Morris swallows hard. “You pissed on my floor,” he says, “you pissed on me.”
Clyde stutters, then stops and lowers his eyes. He appears repentant, beyond despair. “I pissed my pants, Morris. I’m a fuckin’ grown man, and I pissed my pants.” Clyde rifles through his bag. “Oban,” he says to Morris, “fifty bucks a bottle. Take it.”
Morris turns the bottle upside down. Empty. But the idea of scotch warms his chest. He relaxes enough to recognize how complicated his loneliness is. The decision to let her die won’t go away. He doubts himself constantly, not the decision, but the reasoning behind it. Was he really looking out for Tess, or was it a self-conscious attempt to impress the doctors, show them that he was an educated man capable of making life and death decisions? It’s strange, but part of him doesn’t want to find a solution to this question. Not in the immediate future anyway. The doubts torment him, but contemplating that doubt keeps Tess in his life.
Morris can’t confess this to Clyde, a homeless drunk he barely knows. He returns the bottle of Oban. “Put it back in your bag,” he tells Clyde. “You’ll need it.”
Clyde wearily straddles the stretcher rails, jumps down. Silvery ice crystals crust the crotch of his jeans. The stench is gone. “I’m leaving,” Clyde yells to the intern, loud so everyone could hear it. “You didn’t make me any better.”
The intern strides toward them, face red. “You don’t want to get better,” he cries. He bites his lip, rubs his temples. “I don’t have the energy to play this game.”
Clyde’s face explodes. “Game?” He points outside. Kamikaze snowflakes slam into the glass doors to the ER. “What game?”
“You pretend you’re sick. I pretend I can help you.” The intern is breathing quickly now. He curses himself, turns, and with shoulders slumped, walks away.
“Hey, intern,” Morris calls after him; aware that he doesn’t know the young man’s name. “Stop,” Morris says. The intern spins around. “My shift is over. He’s not my problem anymore.”
“Go, I don’t need you,” Clyde screams, waving the empty Oban bottle.
This job is crazy, Morris thinks. But he was offered early retirement and refused it. He knew he’d probably be here anyway, one of those lonely, nervous patients who decide 3 A.M. is the perfect time to have the decade-old mole on his back examined.
Morris reaches for his mop. Clyde snatches his wrist, grafts their bones.
“You back tonight?”
Morris yanks himself free. “I need to finish up, Clyde. It’s time to go home.”