

An Incident at the Love and Peace General Hospital

By Vincent Paiement Désilets

Gina's a nurse at the Love and Peace General Hospital. She's thirty-two, looks fifty. She's been working both the evening and night shifts for the past ten years. When she gets yelled at by a patient, she zones out and thinks about that time she went to Cape Cod six years ago. A crackhead once broke her nose. It still shows. The insurance didn't cover it. She has a cat that doesn't speak to her.

She sips her black, cold coffee from a cup with a bird that says *Early riser gets the worm* and brown stains on the rim. Even the worm smiles on that cup. Gina hasn't smiled for the past seven years.

She looks at the list of patients. She's in triage B. The numbers fifty-six to sixty-two are waiting. Half of those are hers to check.

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Number fifty-seven is Gerard. He folds the paper with his thumb and index, unfolds it, folds it, unfolds it. He sprained his ankle on a job, assumed he could sleep it off. Now it has doubled in size and the pain prevents his sleep. Maybe there is something broken after all. He works in construction, specializes in bathroom tiles. No high school diploma. Two decades and a half ago, he figured he didn't need it. Had got a job mowing lawns instead. Enough to pay for cigarettes and beers. He carries his lunch in an empty paint bucket. Midnight blue. No lid. He spends his weekends at the bar and hits on twenty-year-olds that laugh and turn away. He hides his loneliness behind obscene jokes.

In the waiting room, he smiles at nothing. His front teeth got broken by a bottle in a bar fight. Long time ago.

A voice comes from the speaker.

“Number fifty-seven, triage B.”

Wow. A woman's voice. Maybe she likes hockey. Or watching movies with talking dogs in them. Always funny. Maybe she'll watch a movie like that with him if he's charming enough. He's able to be charming, right? Sometimes. If he makes her laugh. Maybe the joke about the duck with hemorrhoids. Everybody likes that one. All he has to do is not screw up the punch line.

“Number fifty-seven, triage B like Bravo.”

The voice is impatient now. Oops.

Gerard gets up, grimaces from the weight on his left foot. Where's triage B?

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Gina stares at the door with apprehension soaked in boredom. Moron number fifty-seven, incoming. Most people are here for trivial bullshit or for something they caused to themselves. She bets with herself. Fifty-seven's gonna be a *trivial bullshitter*. If she's right, she'll treat herself with another coffee. If she's not, she'll take one anyway. For 2.5 seconds, she fantasizes about taking a bath. How does that feel already? Are baths overrated? Or is she just trying to convince herself of that? She can't take a bath anyway. New organisms created themselves at the bottom of her bathtub.

Gerard limps in, closes the door. She was right.

What's the story?

“I twisted my ankle two days ago. It got pretty bad. I also started feeling a little dizzy, don't know if that's connected.”

Gerard sits on the table. Gina examines his ankle. He frowns, then smiles. After it's done, he says:

“Didn't even cry.”

She doesn't laugh.

“I ain't much of anything, but what I have is tough,” Gerard says.

She checks his eyes with the light.

“Meow,” Gerard says.

When she pulls the light down, he feints to go after it, like a cat, and knocks over a box of Q-Tips.

“Sorry,” he says. Nervous laugh.

Gina sighs. She prepares the blood pressure machine.

“How’s it like being a nurse?” Gerard says.

“Amazing.”

“I’ve always loved nurses. Good women. I believe you can count the dark circles under the eyes like the circles in a tree trunk. One for each year of selfless work.”

She gives him a look filled with knives and gunpowder.

“Didn’t mean that to be insulting,” Gerard says. “I think it looks good. Anyway... Wanna know what I do?”

“Extend your arm.”

“Last time a woman told me that she couldn’t sit for a week.”

Nothing.

“It sounds less dumb if you laugh.”

“I doubt it,” Gina says. She wraps the cuff around his arm, starts the machine.

“I bet I can make you laugh before the morning comes.”

“I doubt it.”

Once it’s all done, Gerard gets up, tries to hide the pain, to avoid looking weak, but then remembers she’s a nurse and playing the pity angle might be best, so he winces.

“Registration’s in front,” Gina says.

Gerard thanks her, goes to registration, and then back to the waiting room, on the same seat, around the same people whose impatience has faded into a Zen-like boredom. The same low buzz from the vending machine that says *Out of order*. The same stale smell. The occasional cough.

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Yan’s a garbage man. He’s the one holding to the side of the truck and picking up the trash

cans. He likes fast cars, fast food, fast money, fast relationships. He has a soft spot for hard drugs. An hour ago he gobbled a lot of speed, more than usual. He tried to be smart. Why keep the buzz going with little doses spread through the night when you could take a bigger dose from the start and ride it to the early hours?

Everything's spinning in Yan's head. He doesn't know where he has to go, what he has to do, but he has to go there and do it fast. There's a ticking clock in his brain. His heart's a woodpecker. He can't move his arms. Why? He's strapped. What the fuck? So many lights from above. He's in a box. Is the box moving or is it just him? A loud, high-pitched sound outside. People in there with him. They talk a language he doesn't understand. Wait 'till those straps come off. He'll give 'em hell.

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Moron number sixty-three, incoming. Gina can track his position from the approaching sound of his screams. The garage, the sliding doors, the entrance... Another one who can't handle his drugs. They shove any kind of shit in their bodies and come clog the health system. Then people complain they wait too long. Wonder why. Gina often fantasizes about climbing on a chair in the waiting room and pointing at people. This one could have waited until the morning. This one's here every week. This one's homeless and he's faking, but we can't kick him out before he sees a doctor, and that's not gonna happen for a while because there's only one in the whole hospital—Gina's been working here for ten years, saw a doctor twice—so he'll end up spending the night like it's a free hotel. What a waste of resources. If the system learned to say no, maybe they'd have enough money left to hire more staff. Or give her a raise.

Here we go. Elisabeth's on break, can't wait for her to take it. Got a job to do. Gotta hold the fort. Someone has to.

“Mo—number sixty-three, triage B.”

Barricade the door, never open it again.

Knock knock knock.

A paramedic gets in. A redhead. She obviously exercises every day and sleeps more than six hours. Fuck her.

The other one stays in the corridor with the cops.

What's the story?

“Drug-induced psychosis,” the paramedic says. “Probably amphetamines. He doesn't answer our questions with anything that makes sense. No name. No identification. We found him in a park fighting with a tree, telling it it ruined his life. I think I heard him call the tree *dad* at some point. Or maybe he said *dead*.”

“Can't wait to meet him,” Gina says. “Bring him in.”

They roll in the stretcher. Gina looks at him. Yan looks at her.

“Fucking alien bitch!” he says. “Doing tests on me.”

He kicks the stretcher's frame. An orderly comes in. Gina says they'll put him in thirty-six. The cops take off the handcuffs. They all transfer him on a new stretcher, strap him on it. The paramedics leave with theirs. The cops leave too. The orderly rolls Yan to slot thirty-six. Yan gnashes his teeth, wriggles. But nothing worse. He just looks like he can't believe what's happening to him.

In thirty-six, the nurses give him something to relax. Nice little drug cocktail. “You won't get me with your poison,” he slurs. But he calms down and looks at the shades of red behind his eyelids.

Later, one of the nurses unties him.

“Really?” asks another.

“Wanna end up in the papers again? All it takes is one patient filming, saying we left a poor soul tied up for nothing. They don't know how he was when he got here, but they won't bother to ask.”

“Fine, go ahead. But you call the code when he decompensate.”

Both nurses shrug in unison.

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In the waiting room, Gerard makes small talk to an Arab woman with her son on her lap. The kid is somewhere between sleep and transcendental state.

“There's something strange with his ear,” the mother says.

Gerard jumps on the opportunity to tell the story about the time a hornet almost burst his eardrum.

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Yan wakes up from his eight-minute nap. Where the fuck is he? White walls. Lights stabbing him in the eyes. A flying saucer? Blurry people come and go around him. Low mumbling from the desk where a screen's blue light bleeds out.

He sees her. Through a doorframe. The woman who did tests on him. Walking in the corridor, a coffee in hand. That's her. The alien bitch.

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Gerard hears the commotion coming from the triage. Then a scream. The voice of his favorite nurse.

Another voice, from the intercom, says:

“Code white, emergency block, triage B. Code white, emergency block, triage B.”

It may take a minute before security arrives. Maybe more. A lot can happen in a minute. You can slip off the roof while cleaning the gutter. Your wife can sign the divorce papers. Your daughter can pretend she doesn't notice you waiting for her in front of the schoolyard. A nurse that's surely nice under her cold facade can be beaten to death, or get severe brain damage. Like cousin Pete. A goddamn vegetable, what a shame. Was such a good rugby player.

Focus. Act now. No one else will.

Gerard gets up, remembers his ankle exists to make his life hell. With a hasty limp, he brings himself to triage B, opens the door.

Yan is trying his best to strangle Gina, who's elbowing him in the face. Yan feels no pain,

caught in a state of hazardous confusion and chemical motivation. A man on a quest who left his mind at the door.

Gerard grabs him by the shoulders and pulls. Now the three dance about the room in a chaotic embrace.

Yan lets go of Gina and turns toward Gerard. His face flashes surprise, as if Gerard just appeared, as if he had accepted the grip on his shoulders as a paranormal occurrence or a divine intervention. He pushes Gerard, who goes down. Something cracks. What? Gerard would know later. If he survives this. He hadn't considered that when he initiated his grand gesture of courage.

Yan runs out. Gerard grabs his leg. He wraps his arms around it, refuses to let go. Like trying to hold on to an epileptic snake.

Yan heads for the entrance, dragging Gerard on the floor behind him. What's the plan now, Gerard? He doesn't know, but he won't let go. Patients in the waiting room stare at the pathetic spectacle.

Yan stomps Gerard's face with the heavy sole of his shoes. Maybe he works in construction? Those are hard, tough shoes. Ruthless shoes. Gerard's teeth loosen out of their cavities. He tastes blood and dirt. Coughs out some of it. His vision blackens. Still, he doesn't let go.

Gina watches from the doorframe of the triage, holds a bag of ice on her cheek.

Gerard's fingers grip tighter. His nails plunge in Yan's leg.

"Leave me alone!" Yan screams.

The sounds of footsteps and keys bouncing come their way.

Two security guards grab Gerard.

"It's not him," Gina says.

"What?" says one of the guards, out of breath and pissed off.

"The other one's the code white."

They leave Gerard and grab Yan, who struggles briskly but vainly.

They bring him to the floor.

Gerard slowly, painfully, pushes himself up.

An orderly arrives with a stretcher, the straps ready.

As they load Yan on the stretcher, Gerard grabs the sign that says *Take a number here* and brings it down on Yan's head.

Gina bursts out laughing.

“Ah, come on!” one guard says. He pushes Gerard aside. “Cut it out.”

“Fucking drunks,” the other one says.

They roll Yan away.

Everything hurts in Gerard, but he manages to turn his head toward Gina before he falls to the floor.

Where did she go? There she is, above him. She puts the bag of ice on his cheek. It feels horrible, yet so warm.

He zones out for a moment and then he's on a bed. Gina's still there, thank God. His face is a bloody mess, he can feel that, so he must not be very pretty. But what about heroism?

“Would you like to go for coffee with me?” he asks.

Gina grunts. What came out of his mouth were not words, but a whirlpool of blood and spit.

Try again. One letter at the time. A. Ahh ahh. Ahhhhhhhhh.

Good. We got letter A handled. Now B. B...B...B... Beeeeee. B like bravo. Bravo.

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At the end of her shift, Gina fills the work incident report. Her supervisor offers her fifteen percent off the first three consultations with a therapist. She's not interested.

She leaves without punching out. She takes the bus home and sleeps for fourteen hours.