

## **Malinger**

I held my Canon with both hands, my right finger poised to capture the sunset. My ex-girlfriend, Miriam, used to sit with me on the banks of Lake Calhoun and watch the sunset until the sky went black. That ended a fall and a winter ago, but of course the sun still sets.

Tonight the sun was supposed to set at exactly 8:37 p.m., but because sunlight is refracted between space and the earth's atmosphere, the sun doesn't visually set until it's nearly a degree below the actual horizon. The difference is only about a minute, but when you're trying to shoot the precise moment on film, it might as well be a lifetime.

"Haile."

Christy stood in the doorway. She pronounced my name "Hail-ee," like the comet, and not "Hi-lee," as it's supposed to be.

"Hey, Christy," I said as the sun's leading edge pursed towards the horizon. "Aren't you supposed to be in group right now?"

"No one's there."

"Lonnie said group was starting at 8:30."

"It's not."

"Well, just go there and sit around a while. People'll show up."

"No one's coming," she said from somewhere nearer to my shoulder than I would have liked. Her lips tightened into a constipated grimace against her teeth.

"Lonnie'll be there."

"No, she won't."

"Just go. She'll be there."

“Haile!”

Christy grabbed my hand and pointed down the hall in the opposite direction of the windows and the sunset. My trigger finger was in her palm instead of pressing the shutter button. My camera’s cracked lens stared at me from the floor like a blind cyclops.

“Remember what I told you, Christy, about touching staff.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Remember?”

“...But I didn’t mean to...”

“You lose your evening snack.”

She released my hand.

Her full moon eyes shimmered with yellow light from the sunset. The constipated look became diarrheic. Tears cascaded down her cheeks, but she didn’t wipe them away.

“I’m going to let you get away with it, okay?” I smiled.

Her brows furrowed and shook to the sounds of her sniffles. She stared at me through the tops of her eyes. A dollop of snot peeked at me, too, from the corner of a nostril.

I ignored it.

“You’re going to keep your evening snack, Christy. But that’s the rule. Remember?”

She dug her tennis shoes into the rug.

“I know.”

I nodded my head and curled the ends of my smile to get her to reciprocate, but she wouldn’t. One of her hands still pointed towards the hallway. “Now, what were you trying to tell me?”

Her eyeballs turned towards her hand.

“They need you back there.”

“Was Lonnie asking for me?”

“There’s a code 21.”

“Shit.”

My gaze strayed back to the windows. The nine million-something color pixels in a frame of film can hardly begin to capture the sunset, but they’re the best harness I can think of. Tonight was another night I’d be returning home empty-handed.

Christy picked up my camera and served it to me with both hands beneath it, like a main course on a platter.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, Christy,” I said, willing my smile not to falter. I took the camera and backpedaled out of the room until Christy became a silhouette.

The mauve wallpaper in the hallway blurred with the emptiness of open room doorways and bucolic portraits. The patients were hidden quietly somewhere behind the walls, sleeping or watching TV, worrying. I passed each of their rooms, straining for but not hearing any signs of disruption. The hallway kept going, but I turned along a trampled path into the nurses’ station.

My mother named me Haile after Ethiopia’s legendary emperor, Haile Selassie. Miriam thought that and my smile were sexy. And when she tired of the sex, she hung around for a couple more months, long enough to realize that I was not as exotic as my name and my mother would suggest. Her “Dear Haile” note wasn’t even four lines long.

The front desk was empty. Lonnie was standing at the back end of the station, which attached to the locked unit. She was the lead nurse. Virginia, the evening-shift secretary, was

sitting next to her. They stared through a wall of Plexiglas at the closed door of room four and the perpetually running TV in the cramped commons area.

Virginia clutched a mound of paperwork to her chest and swiveled on her chair when she heard me come.

“Well, there you are.”

“Christy said there’s a code 21?”

“*Was* a code a 21. I think it’s about handled now.”

“I came as a fast as I could.”

Lonnie winked at me. “It’s okay. We got him in restraints and he’s asleep now.”

“Who’s in restraints?”

“Karl. Dr. Keyes just put him on a 72-hour hold.”

Virginia scooted over to me.

“Flipped his lid. Smoke was fuming out his ears like he’d just come back from shock treatment.” Her eyes bugged out.

“Oh, Virginia.” Lonnie laughed. She handed Karl’s chart to me. “Karl’s pissed because it’s Friday night and the weekend doesn’t count as part of the hold. He can’t get out of here until Wednesday.”

“You should’ve seen him, Haile. Pacing the hallway. He’s a talker, that Karl. You know how he is.”

“Was he talking to his mom again?” I asked, taking the chart and setting down my camera on the medication cabinet.

“I wasn’t staying around long enough to listen. Little old lady like me. He could punch me half-way into next month. And I still haven’t made my payment on the Mitsubishi.”

Virginia swung back her head as if Karl's phantom right hook belted her in the chin. The three strings of pearl necklaces her late husband had given her clattered from the shock of the imagined blow.

"Virginia," Lonnie said, steadying her chair, "I don't think he'd have to punch you for you to fall over backwards."

"Yeah, all he'd have to do is look at me the wrong way." Virginia sat forward again, tipping her bifocals askew on purpose. "He's a real nutcase."

"Says here that Keyes thinks he's cheeking his meds." My finger pointed at the most recent doctor's note in Karl's chart.

Lonnie's turquoise blues took a cursory look.

"That's not the reason he's back here."

"Whenever I see him, he keeps asking for his mom."

"No, that's not it either. He's got romance problems."

"Christy?"

"You've seen how they look at each other. He says he's in love."

It was hard to picture anyone loving Christy, but not impossible. She was quick to warm up to people, whether or not they responded.

Virginia chimed in, "Keyes said he's obsessed. Can't get her out of his mind."

I frowned. "That doesn't explain the 72-hour hold."

"Keyes caught him in her room holding hands with her," Lonnie said.

Hospital policy forbids patients from making physical contact outside of hugs or handshakes supervised by staff. I can't say it's a bad idea. Patients come to the unit to get stabilized while doctors determine a course of long-term treatment for their mental illnesses. Some are committed to state psychiatric wards based on the short week or two they're here

for observation. Little can be said for the merits of physical contact as a prescription for a balanced mind.

“Did Karl blow up?” I asked.

“Right away,” Lonnie said. “He told Keyes to ‘get the *F* out of here,’ and then he took a chair and threw it. Keyes jumped out of the room as fast as he could and told us to call a code 21.”

“He’s a cool cucumber,” Virginia announced from the front desk, where she had scooted on her chair to start stamping Karl’s ID number onto a stack of code 21 report forms. “Comes running up to me and rattles off orders faster than I can think to pull out a pen. Before I know it, he’s on the phone to Pharmacy telling them to bring up a nice little cocktail.”

Lonnie walked out front to Virginia, long blond hair trailing in the wake.

“Keyes said if he starts taking his meds again, the hallucinations will go away.”

“Hope something works soon. We keep getting all these repeat customers.”

Karl’s first admission was in January, and he was admitted again on Monday. If he takes his Risperdal twice a day, he doesn’t see his mother sneaking around watching him from behind doorposts or hear her berating him about the wrinkles in his pants or his unkempt hair. If he stays on his Risperdal, he can hold down a job delivering pizzas without having to argue with her about the unsuitability of his job or his meager wages. But he quit his Risperdal more than two weeks ago, after failing to visit his mother on Mother’s Day.

Christy is a repeat customer, too. She was here during Karl’s first stay in January, admitted again in March, and a third time on Tuesday. Their multiple and shared admissions have created plenty of time for friendship, although I had not expected it to become something more.

I set down Karl's chart and joined Lonnie and Virginia out front.

"What was Christy's reaction to all this?"

"I don't know," Lonnie said. The bags beneath her eyes were dark and wrinkly from working too many double shifts, but her rosy cheeks and smile belied the fatigue. She sipped her coffee. "I was too busy getting Karl into the locked unit."

I should've been helping instead of photographing the sunset.

"I didn't know about the code 21 until Christy told me about it."

"Everything happened so quickly there wasn't time to get you."

"I didn't hear anything down in the rec area."

"There wasn't much noise. Just a lot of wrestling."

She walked over to the medication cabinet and picked up my camera. She rubbed her finger over the cracked lens.

"Looks like you'll need to get this fixed."

I pretended to pull out Christy's chart from the overhead shelf.

"I have another at home."

"Did you get the sunset at least?"

"No. Christy came in. She was upset."

"It's going to be a beautiful picture when you finally get it."

My attempts to photograph the sunset were no secret. I had been trying to capture it during my break every night for the last ten weeks. The nurses knew this and thought it cute.

"Maybe I should go talk to Christy."

"Good idea." She set the camera down gently, grabbed a pen, and picked up Karl's chart. "I have to wake up Karl and try to get him to take his meds, otherwise Keyes is going to get a court order. I might be a while."

She nodded at me and then left.

On some days Lonnie looked so much like an older version of Miriam that my eyes would linger until she was compelled to smile before I looked away. Maybe she thought this was cute, too. I appear as much like her lover as I would her child, which is to say not at all. My Ethiopian skin and curls make me her photo negative.

“Christy, are you in there?” I announced as I entered the rec area.

“Haile?” She sat up from a sofa she had probably been sitting on since I left. “Is the code 21 over?”

“It was over before I got there.” I flipped on a light switch.

The rec area was surrounded by an embankment of floor-to-ceiling windows that permitted a bird’s-eye view of the world for twenty miles in every direction but east, where the hallway connected with it. It was eleven stories above the obstructions of office plazas and shopping malls, burly semis and overflowing parking lots. It was so high you could see the curve of the horizon. It was an excellent place to shoot the sunset.

The twilight was just reaching the point where the visibility seemed as much like night as day. I was tempted to stand by the windows.

“I like watching the lights flick on.”

“Pretty,” Christy whispered.

“Yeah, it is.”

I sat down on the bench of an out-of-tune piano adjacent to Christy’s sofa, but my eyes were still focused on the windows, where the reflection of Christy’s face haunted the city’s twinkling backdrop. Her nose swelled in the middle and tapered towards the tip. Her cheeks were pudgy with little pockets of flesh that seemed to bend her upper lip outwards.

She was almost 50 years old, but her mouth was clumsy and childlike. Her skin was almost wrinkle-free.

“Can I do anything to cheer you up?”

“No,” she said.

“You didn’t tell me about Karl.”

She folded her arms. “You didn’t ask.”

“I would’ve asked if you’d mentioned him.”

“He said he loves me.”

“Do you believe him?”

She shook her head.

I was expecting her to think he did love her. Her IQ is 78, which leaves her on the borderline between normal intelligence and mild retardation. She has no contact with her family and no friends. She won’t let us wash her clothes and hates baths. She has tried to kill herself twice. Maybe she didn’t want anyone to care for her. Maybe she wanted to fade away.

“Why do you think he told you that?”

“Because he wants me to love him.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“But you were holding hands with him.”

“Doesn’t mean I love him.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It’s pretend.” She lifted her hand. It was shaking. “He believed this hand could love him.” She pounded her chest with it. “My hand. My hand.”

“It’s okay, Christy.”

“No, it’s not.”

She was looking at me to say something, but I couldn’t.

“He was so scared.” She was nearly breathless.

“Scared of what?”

“Of losing his mother.” Her glazed eyes stared at the orange from the residual sunset that was burning into bronze and from there into darkness. “He doesn’t hear the voices anymore. The medicine makes her go away.” She pronounced *medicine* as a two-syllable word.

“The voices are supposed to go away. They’re in his head.”

“But what’ll he do without them?”

“Move on. Be normal.”

“He’ll be all alone. Nobody’s going to love him.”

The thought of a lifetime of dark, lonely winter nights and Valentine’s Days watching reruns prompted me to turn away. There was no reason to believe that Karl or Christy would ever resemble anyone normal. Nobody was going to love them. Would I be that alone, too? Trying to capture Miriam in a sunset was absurd.

Christy’s eyes were probing and prodding me. I couldn’t see her, but I felt her. Her knees popped like baby-sized firecrackers as her weight shifted onto her legs. There was a sigh as she stood up. A waft of armpit odor pierced the tears that began to trickle down my cheeks and clog my nose with mucus, as befitted a romantic who couldn’t endure the loss of a girlfriend.

Both her arms cradled me. Our reflection in the window accentuated the differences between us. I was still on the piano bench, but she filled the sky like rain.