

A terminally ill man falls for a patient on the psychiatric ward where he works.

“Here we are,” Donnie sang as he pushed the wheelchair into room 52. “Which bed would ya like, Irene? You’re first in, so you get dibs.”

Of course she didn’t answer. He was just trying to make her feel safe. He’d been told his voice was soothing, not like Paul’s sultry baritone, but gentle, comforting. Donnie maneuvered the chair alongside the bed near the window, locked the wheels, walked around the chair to see the patient’s face. Her right eye was swollen, hair a tangled mess. Bruises covered her face and arms. “Can you stand, Dear?”

Irene stared straight ahead, as if she didn’t realize Donnie and Paul were in the room. On three, they heaved her out of the chair - dead weight - and settled her onto the mattress.

“Irene?” Paul asked, “Can we bring anything to make you more comfortable?”

His deep voice hung in the air. If Irene was in her right mind, she’d be swooning, like girls usually did when Paul was near; lucky shit.

Donnie slid the blanket from the foot of the bed over Irene’s small frame. She was all skin and bones. “You’re safe now, Irene” Donnie whispered. Her eyes sparked for just a second. Or did they? It could’ve been the lights flickering.

The flickering of the lights in the emergency room had made Irene feel extra jumpy. Now, in this quiet room alone, Irene felt it was happening all over again, felt she was still sitting

on the hard bench in the waiting room with her three beautiful children, rocking herself and Peter, felt she was watching Tina tell her story for the first time. Tina's mouth - red from the lollipop they'd given her at the registration desk. Face - dirty from the sandbox. The bows Irene had so carefully tied that morning - undone, hanging limply from messy brown pigtails. Squeaky five-year-old voice repeating the story she'd told in the car. "Petey wouldn't take his Teddy Bear, Mama. He threw it and screamed, so Daddy gave Peter some medicine."

"What medicine, Sweetheart?"

"Daddy's medicine."

What medicine? Irene had wondered, though she knew now, in the quiet room alone. But hearing the story in the car, and again in the waiting room, Irene had been confused.

In the hallway, Donnie double checked his assignments. It had been quiet on the ward lately for some reason, which explained the empty beds in room 52. The Professor shuffled by, an unlit pipe in his mouth. He held an open book in front of him, as if he was reading.

"How ya doin', Professor?" Donnie asked loudly, receiving only a grunt in response.

"What's the deal with Irene?" Paul whispered. "She sedated?"

Paul's training period was over, but Donnie reminded himself his little brother was still new to the job. Six months on the psychiatric ward was nothing. Donnie looked at Paul - fit from his brief stint in the Navy, a strong, open face that attracted all the girls, dark eyes that revealed his smarts and his fear. Seeing signs of abuse reminded Paul of their sometimes harsh upbringing and made him nervous. Donnie had done what he could to protect his little brother growing up, but he couldn't be there all the time. He'd heard it always got worse for Paul when he went away. Now, Paul was the one protecting him, not from abuse, but from —

Paul repeated the question, and Donnie realized he had spaced out again. "No, she's not sedated. There was a bad scene in the E.R. and she dissociated."

"Dissociated?" Paul asked.

"Checked out, ya know? Like an altered state. Still conscious, but in her mind she's somewhere else."

Irene shifted Peter's body so she could see his face. He was still sleeping, his mouth frozen in a dopey grin, eyes half open - creepy. If his body wasn't so warm, Irene might have thought... she shuddered at what she might have thought.

"Why does he look like that, Mom?" Jimmy asked. Irene was afraid to look into her older son's wise blue eyes. Now that he was twelve, it was harder to hide things from him. She shook her head, "I don't know, Sweetheart."

Tina continued, like a broken record. She'd told them the story over and over since they got in the car. "Petey didn't like the shot, but then he went to sleep. It was a scary kind of sleep, and I told Daddy, but Daddy wasn't listening. Daddy was taking his shot."

Irene couldn't stand to hear it; couldn't stand not to hear it; didn't know how to respond. "You took care of your baby brother, just like a big girl, Tina. You're Mama's good girl."

Tina looked into her mother's face, earnest, urgent. "I don't know why Daddy likes shots, 'cause nobody else in the whole world likes shots, but he really does, Mama. He really does. He even said: Tina, this medicine makes daddy feel so good, and he smiled, and closed his eyes."

"Irene, can you open your eyes?"

His soft voice roused her from the deep sleep into which she had drifted. Kind. Familiar. Musical.

“Irene? It’s supper time. Will you come to the dining room?”

She opened her eyes a crack. Dark hair, dark eyes, soft features. White uniform. He was kneeling beside her on one knee, steadying himself with his hands. His fingertips were pudgy, like little clubs. His face was close. Handsome. Warm. Open.

“Are you hungry?”

A quiet moan was all she could manage. “Peter?”

“I’ll bring something to your room, all right? You like fish or steak?”

She nodded.

“Steak?”

His shoes squeaked as he walked away.

Irene looked at the white Linoleum, white walls, white blanket covering her body. She fingered the hospital bracelet on her wrist, heard the social worker’s voice in her head.

“Tina ’n Jimmy are good kids. We’ll make sure they go to good homes.”

“What?!?!?”

“We’ll keep ‘em together if possible.”

“What? But, I, I just went, I just went next door. I, I, I was just having coffee with my neighbor.”

“There are many responsible families in our foster care system who will—“

“Responsible! I’m, I’m... Jimmy was in the backyard playing with the neighbor’s son. Tina and Peter were home with their father.”

“They’re not safe in your home, and it looks like you’re not safe in your home, either. Are you.”

Irene sat up and tried to shake the memory out of her head. She imagined Peter’s chubby little face laughing. His fat fingers holding crayons. Peter learning to walk, climbing onto the couch, bouncing to music. Peter giving her slobbery baby kisses. Peter - happy, a normal boy, a sweet, normal, healthy eighteen-month-old. Her baby. Playing in the sandbox with the big kids. Swinging with Tina at the playground. Riding on his big brother’s shoulders. Giggling. Happy. Normal. Tina calling, “Mama!” Fear in her voice. Peter limp in his big sister’s arms. “What happened??? Peter? What HAPPENED, Tina?”

“Daddy gave Peter his medicine and he fell over.”

What medicine? No time to listen, scooping them both into her arms with a strength Irene didn’t know she had, running to the car, calling, screaming for Jimmy to come, to hurry, to get in the car. Jimmy panting, asking what happened? Driving to the hospital.

Peter? “Mama’s here, baby. Mama’s here. Everything’s okay, Peter. You’re okay, Sweetheart.” But he wasn’t. I never shoulda left him.

Now, her chest was caving in, shoulders rounding, breath leaving. It was like she was sitting on the emergency room bed again, holding Tina in one arm and Jimmy in the other, feeling the emptiness on her lap where Peter had been sitting before they took him away for tests. It was like the doctor was standing in front of her again, saying words she couldn’t recognize. “The problem is your 18-month-old just OD’d on heroin.”

“Heroin!?!”

“— which caused something called hypoxia.”

“How would he get heroin?”

“Hypoxia starved his brain of oxygen, and the brain damage is permanent.”

“Brain dam- That’s not possible, Doctor.”

“There’s nothing we can do, Mrs. Boutelle.”

“His father just gave him some medicine to make him stop crying. Right, Tina?”

Tina piped up, “Daddy gave him some of his medicine, and he said, ‘This medicine makes Daddy feel so good, Tina, and he smiled, and-“

The doctor cleared his throat and looked pointedly at Irene. She was dumbstruck. That medicine. Tina’s talking about heroin. Michael’s using drugs? Where’s he getting them? My husband’s using drugs. He gave drugs to our baby to keep him quiet. “Oh, God!”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Boutelle. We’re going to make sure Peter is stabilized and then he’s going to an institution for the mentally retarded.”

“Oh, God!”