

along the line then lose their connection. She is lost.

What's her story? The woman wears a hospital gown with one of those rumpled blue print cotton robes tied over it. Her face is as grey as her hair. Her arms are grey sticks, blue veins bulging. The man looks healthier, his ruddy face, plaid shirt, jeans, boots and feed cap all proclaiming farmer. Who is he? Her husband? A brother? There's some resemblance. The husband — let's call him that — stands patiently in the line. The wife — let's call her that — becomes more and more agitated. She clutches the two dolls and rocks silently in her wheelchair.

This is wrong, I think. She ought not to have to wait. I'm nearer to the front now so I turn and motion to the man. Please, go ahead of me. He shakes his head shyly. He's not used to charity. No, go on, I say.

The nurses — let's call them nurses — behind me have stopped talking about cremation. They tell him wheelchairs can cut the line. Yes, says the lady in the hijab. Wheelchairs should go first. Murmurs of agreement. Suddenly everyone in the line is nodding and pointing at the till, so he goes over and stands next to the wheelchair. Her hands stop shaking.

The queue loses interest.



"They have lots of other options if you don't want an urn. They have this package where they'll take his foot and make an impression with it. They will even paint it the same colour as the fur. Then they mount it, and you can put it on the wall."

"That'd be a nice keepsake."

"Yeah."

"How long do you think he's got?"

"Days. A week at most." A sigh. "He keeps meowing. He's in pain, I know it. I hate to see him suffer. I think I'm going to have to put him down."

"You're gonna miss that cat."

Another sigh. "Yeah."



The man has wheeled his wife over to one of the tables. He's bought her some sort of hot drink and is blowing

on it and stirring it to cool it down. He puts a straw through the lid and then puts the cup in her hands. The two baby dolls rest in their blanket in her lap. She takes a sip on the straw and smiles.

The little girl is sitting with her dad and eating a burger, her pink boots swinging happily under the table.

The woman in the hijab is gone.

I stand at the till and order a medium double-double.

The two nurses order extra-large double-doubles and joke about how the new cups don't fit in the microwave if you want to reheat them during your shift. But you can always cut off the

top inch if you need to. One of them brandishes a pair of bandage scissors on a lanyard.

I pay and head back to work.

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All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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POETRY

She hits me

She was 14 years old, and very angry.

She had come to see me for a suspected eating disorder. She was not interested in any therapeutic alliance. Her crossed arms and schoolbag planted firmly on her lap made her displeasure clear.

Her mother was quiet, pleasant and polite. She tried to make up for her daughter's reticence. I spoke to her alone behind closed doors.

"She hits me." She began to cry. The mother, not the daughter.

Hers was a heart-wrenching story of domestic violence. Of divorce and all its painful aftermath. Now the daughter was following in her father's footsteps.

I listened, and consoled. I offered several suggestions and avenues for help. But mainly I just listened.

"Thank you so much." Some of the tension had left her face. *Now I can go on.*

The rest of the consult was methodical, aimed at excluding organic causes of vomiting. For the first time in a long while, I left the clinic feeling that I had genuinely helped someone.

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