

## **Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Signature:

Jordan Keller

4/22/2010

Date

What We Learned About Protein: two short stories

by

Jordan Keller

Adviser Jim Grimsley

Department of English and Creative Writing

---

Jim Grimsley

Adviser

---

Michelle Lampl

Committee Member

---

Lynna Williams

Committee Member

---

4/22/2010

What We Learned About Protein: two short stories

By

Jordan Keller

Adviser Jim Grimsley

An abstract of  
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of English and Creative Writing

2010

## Abstract

What We Learned About Protein: two short stories

By Jordan Keller

Matters of health are explored. In one story, “Killing Kristine Three Times,” the same character’s death is described in three different scenarios: one in which she dies miserably in the present, one in which she dies magnificently in the near future, and one in which she dies despite having the option to live forever. All three scenarios are based on technologies and ideas that are now in development or practice in reality. In the other story, “Thinking of Your Future,” communication problems between doctors, a preacher, and the parents of a boy with a rare disease (PKU) may threaten his chances for leading a normal life.

What We Learned About Protein: two short stories

By

Jordan Keller

Adviser Jim Grimsley

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of English and Creative Writing

2010

Table of Contents

Thinking of Your Future.....Page 1  
Killing Kristine Three Times.....Page 31

Thinking of your future

\*\*\*\*\*

Todd Plank, the first case of identified PKU in the state of Kentucky, came into the world at a relatively good time for someone with his problem. His father was a tenant farmer and his mother stayed at home and cleaned houses here and there to help keep the bills paid. Three days after Todd was born, he had gotten a shot in the heel, and the Shale Hospital medical director, Dr. Reginald Hanft, had explained to Margaret and Ernest Plank that they had an interesting journey ahead of them.

Todd's birth was difficult and Margaret had been laid up for two weeks at the least. Todd seemed alright, if little, except that the nurses couldn't get him to stop vomiting sporadically from a few hours after his birth. Margaret had only been a little worried—she was glad that she had finally carried a baby through birth, no matter how difficult it was. She was breast feeding Todd and forgetting the pain of his delivery when Dr. Hanft burst into the room when Todd was five days old. Todd started crying but Margaret didn't stop feeding him.

“The test results for that blood we took from your son's heel are back. I don't want to scare you, but you're going to have to stop nursing. He's got a disease that has to do with his diet. We've got formula made just for him, for his problem so that he doesn't suffer mental retardation.”

“What are you doing just pushing in here when my wife's feeding our son? Don't you have decency?”

Dr. Hanft had not considered that even after he mentioned retardation that the Planks might need more provocation.



“Mr. and Mrs. Plank, I’m sorry, but your son—you need to stop. He’s got a disease called phenylketonuria. We’ve tested it three times and it’s pretty definite.”

The doctor, and no one else for that matter, had ever diagnosed a case of phenylketonuria in Kentucky, but it was something that most doctors had started to hear about in medical school. PKU wasn’t a new disease of course, but medical researchers had just started understanding it and there were some states that had already started testing infants at birth. PKU, as it was called, was a complicated genetic disease and could be very debilitating, but it seemed controllable with a very strict diet. And companies were coming up with new foods every month to accommodate PKU patients.

Dr. Hanft would eventually write pages into the scientific literature about the disorder, just like he’d done for several other illnesses. He was a brilliant and hard-working doctor to be sure, but more than that even, he was a researcher. He was intrigued by PKU, and secretly, he was glad that he’d come across a patient with it. He found the issue with PKU particularly poignant as far as genetic diseases went. Protein, the very substance of life, becomes a poison. Protein is essential for everything, and a healthy body has the ability to transform protein from food into usable amino acids for growth, development, and functioning of every body system. The issue with PKU is that the body does *not* have that ability, and so the eating of anything with significant amounts of protein leads to mental and developmental retardation. There are more foods with protein than without to be sure, and so a PKU patient child needs parents who are careful from birth, since too many slip-ups or a refusal to follow a PKU diet will invariably lead to irreversible damage.

“What? What’s wrong with my son?” Margaret asked, her eyes wide and the corners of her mouth slanted downwards. She couldn’t think of a thing that she’d done wrong.

“It’s a genetic condition that has to do with the amino acid phenylalanine that converts into tyros—”

“You just wait a second. We ain’t doctors and we don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!” Ernest said in a huff.

Normally, Dr. Hanft and most doctors he’d met could get away with being slightly confusing. But he realized that PKU was especially complicated, and that the Planks would not be receptive to scientific terminology.

“I’m sorry! I’m going to send a nutritionist from Louisville to your house to explain the diet to you, and then I’ll send a nurse to help you. In a few months you’ll have it, but I can send Nurse Perry to your house for as long as you need—she says she knows you.”

“Can’t we just do it at the hospital?” Margaret asked.

Dr. Hanft wanted to make sure that his patient did not suffer mental retardation. It might not be too late as long as his parents cooperated. It was also generally important to study whether or not the PKU diet could invariably eliminate any symptoms of the disease.

“Well, we can talk about it some here. But this isn’t going to be easy and it might help if you had someone to walk you through it where you’re going to be for your son’s first few years.”

“I don’t want a stranger in my home telling me how to keep house! My mommy did just fine, thank you.”

This diet was too important for the Planks to take it on without help, especially at first. Dr. Hanft didn’t quite know what he would do if he had to fight with the parents of his PKU patient. He supposed he would fight. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t be nice about it.

“Oh, Mrs. Plank, forgive me. I would never send someone to tell you how to run your household. But this diet that Todd will be on is going to take some special considerations, and—”

“And some special money, too, right?” Ernest cut in.

They were focusing on all the wrong things, and Dr. Hanft could tell that they were going to be complicated. This wouldn’t cost them a dime, and even if it did, it was about keeping their son from becoming severely mentally retarded.

“Your insurance might not cover something like this yet, but the hospital will help you, Mr. Plank, and so will the University of Kentucky. They’ve never seen a case of PKU before and they want to get involved.”

Ernest stomped the floor.

“So my son’s a side show goon like in the circus then?”

“No, no, only the medical community will be involved. It’s about your son as a patient, not an attraction.”

Todd would be somewhat an attraction, it was true, but only for doctors and researchers who could use his case to help others. Dr. Hanft didn’t see anything wrong with that.

“Why does the *medical community*, I guess you mean all those doctors and nurses, why do they need to know about Todd’s eating?” Ernest asked.

“It’s just about helping you to care for your son and giving us information on how to help other children with the same disease.”

The doctor checked his watch. He still had some reading to do before he went home this afternoon. He wasn’t an expert on PKU, though with some heavy reading and the help of Todd Plank, he could be eventually.

“Ain’t they never seen, what’d you call it, phene-ole-ket—”

“It’s phenylketonuria, but we just call it PKU. And it’s really rare. In Kentucky, there’ve probably been cases before, but Todd is the first one that we’ve found at birth. We just started testing every newborn less than a year ago.”

Dr. Hanft wanted to emphasize how historic this was, but he figured that the Planks wouldn’t appreciate it as much as he did.

“And there ain’t nobody in Lexington or Louisville or anywhere else? I don’t believe it,” Ernest said.

“Like I said, there are probably other cases, but we just haven’t found them.”

He looked at his watch again. He didn’t need to be here much longer, especially if he would just be repeating himself.

“But how did he get it?” Margaret asked. She just knew that Todd had caught something because she’d taken pain medications during the delivery. She would never be able to forgive herself.

“It’s genetic, Mrs. Plank, so it would mean that you carry a PKU gene and so does Mr. Plank.”

Margaret's heart sank. So they were saying that she *had* been responsible.

"I'm not carrying anything. What are you talking about?" she asked.

"No, not physically carried. Have you heard of genetics? The passing on of traits from parents to children?"

"No," Ernest said and crossed his arms.

This wasn't Dr. Plank's job, to explain genetics to laypersons. He'd have to get a nurse to do it. The little things, like definitions and mechanism explanations, were the ones that were becoming the biggest problems with his first case of PKU, and that was disappointing. He was above all a research doctor, and research was what he should be doing, no matter who his patients were, no matter how educated.

"Well, I'm sorry. I should have considered that. I'll send in Nurse Perry. She can talk to you about this. She'll stay here all night if you need her. The nutritionist should be here first thing tomorrow, and I'll be working with you every day."

Dr. Hanft patted Ernest on the shoulder and left the room in a rush.

"I stopped smoking and always got enough rest," Margaret sobbed as the door shut behind the doctor.

Ernest turned red.

"You did everything right, sweetheart. These assholes just don't have a clue why Todd is puking and they wanna blame it on us. I can't wait to hear what Brenda has to say."

Nurse Brenda Perry was a childhood friend of Margaret's, and both the Planks trusted her. She came into the room after the doctor left and explained genetics and PKU to the best of her ability, and Margaret and Ernest were horrified. They didn't believe that

they had somehow caused such a terrible sickness in their son. After a virtually pointless session to explain basic genetics, she gave up and tried to excite them about the new products on the market for PKU nutrition.

“Do not worry. Ten years ago, we would have been up a creek. Now, your son will develop fine and have a varied diet. I read an article about a girl in New York, and she had PKU and she’s doing fine with a good diet.”

Even though Nurse Perry told them, just like Dr. Shrike had, that the hospital and the University of Kentucky would likely cover all of the costs of the special foods, Ernest was still nervous. He didn’t want to get stuck paying for a special lifestyle, because he didn’t think the Planks were special people. They never had been.

But Ernest also didn’t want his son to be sick. Remarkably, after their conversation with Nurse Perry, the Planks decided to keep their son on a special PKU diet—for a time. It was a difficult diet to follow, including documentation of protein intake and no cheating, and Margaret and Ernest did their best to remain strict.

Dr. Hanft made regular phone calls to the Plank household during most of Todd’s first year, and sent Nurse Perry every week to make sure that the Planks were following the PKU diet. He held checkups on the boy every other week at the hospital so that he could take growth measurements and perform cognitive assessments. For awhile, the doctor was quite pleased with Todd’s condition and he wrote regular reports and sent letters to neurologists and others interested in PKU. The diet seemed to be working and scientists were learning a lot.

But the Planks didn’t follow it forever. About two years after Todd’s birth, when it became necessary for the Planks to drive to Louisville to get food, the resolve of his

parents started to waver. Their strictness became sporadic and not nearly as intense as Dr. Hanft had suggested. Also, Margaret was terribly sad when she felt her milk being let down inside of her for nothing. Finally, and mostly because of Nurse Perry and her new holy man, Reverend Shrike, the diet was completely abandoned.

Reverend Shrike was a well-known preacher in Shale who had been very receptive to the Planks' troubles with Todd. He'd started the New Light Hope Center years ago after leaving the First Presbyterian Church, where his style of worship had not been appreciated. He liked intensity, and that didn't work for everyone. But he and his congregation worked hard to recruit those who were most in need of a helping hand, those who had been brought down by life and all its crooked players.

A tall and charismatic, silver-haired orator, by the end of service, the Reverend's deep southern bass had the female members of his congregation crying and reaching for the ceiling from their knees in the aisles and in front of their pews. The men were often just as affected, even if they didn't hit the floor. Some people in Shale looked down on such a style of worship, but they weren't the important ones and they didn't keep Reverend Shrike from spreading the truth to the faithful, no matter how twisted they considered the church. The reverend really knew how to infuse his congregation with the passion of their Lord. And in his opinion, the Lord was not passionate about the PKU diet.

Nurse Perry had been a strong advocate of Doctor Hanft's plan for Todd's health until her husband died and she turned to the New Light Hope Center to assuage her grief. Reverend Shrike convinced her that doctors only thought about themselves, and after two months of intense worship, she had decided to share the message with the Planks. She

invited them to service and the Reverend convinced them within a few services that Todd didn't need anything but God's love. And Nurse Perry advised them not to tell Todd's doctor, since he wouldn't understand.

Soon after Margaret and Ernest stopped having Todd follow his special diet, he began showing signs of untreated PKU. He wasn't stupid, but he was definitely cognitively delayed, and it got worse as his disease progressed. Dr. Hanft was puzzled when he noticed Todd's quick downwards spiral in the face of such good maintenance, especially since Nurse Perry reported perfect adherence to the diet. Their reverend and congregation calmed the Planks about it, and most Sundays recharged them for the upcoming weeklong battle with Todd's health.

Margaret thought he was a gorgeous boy, no matter how little he was and no matter how much help he needed. His head had been small when he was younger, but it was reaching a smaller normal size. And his father was short, so it made sense that he would be too. He'd been the same size for a relatively long time, but his parents didn't mind. It saved the family money on clothes, his delayed growth spurt, and they knew that things would work out in the end. More than anyone else, Reverend Shrike helped them to understand that.

One morning when Todd was a little over three years old, Dr. Hanft decided that he needed to show up in person at the Planks' house, something he had never done before. Based on Todd's condition, he'd finally started to suspect that the Planks weren't following the diet. He'd thought that he'd gotten to know the family quite well over the years since Todd's birth, and even though neither they nor Nurse Perry had admitted any slip-ups, he knew that the diet was not easy and that the Planks were not incredibly



intelligent. When he knocked on the front door of the small and tattered Plank household, he heard Ernest rushing to the door.

“Just a minute! Marg’s nursing the boy. But she’s done. Be right there!”

The doctor nearly fell down. They’d been lying to him. As a bird behind him chirped behind him, he imagined killing it, killing anything.

Ernest was very surprised to find Dr. Hanft at the door. He thought about slamming him out, but the doctor was so angry-looking that he just stood there. The Plank home was mostly one room, and the doctor saw Margaret in the chair across from the front door, looking tired and worried.

“Dr. Hanft, how ya doing? Never seen you over *here* before. We don’t have a checkup at the hospital until Thursday, do we?”

“Nurse Perry said that you were following the diet. What the hell are you doing here?” Dr. Hanft asked as he pushed past Ernest. “Now I understand why he’s not growing.”

Margaret didn’t say anything. She had the face of a toddler who was about to be disciplined. But Dr. Hanft considered her less intelligent than a toddler.

“We tried our damndest,” Ernest said. “Brenda didn’t tell you everything because she knew how you’d react. And she knew we were going to do what we wanted. What God wanted.”

“I called to check up on you every week, sometimes twice! How could you not make *sure* to follow the diet rather than just try? You lied to me! It’s so important, and I don’t even know what kind of damage you’ve done!”

It was remarkable. The doctor had been puzzled by Todd's poor condition, and now it made perfect sense. And Nurse Perry was a liar who would be fired. She and the Planks were ruining this boy's life, and they were ruining scientific progress.

Ernest huffed and stepped between his wife and the doctor.

"Well, I don't see how a little mother milk is going to hurt anything. It's natural. *Nothin'* more natural."

The doctor ignored Ernest and stepped to the side so that he could look at Margaret straight on.

"How long have you been breast feeding Todd? Didn't you notice that it was making his condition worse?"

Margaret wiped her eyes and pulled Todd closer to her.

"He's so hungry some nights. He wouldn't stop crying until I started."

"I explained this to you when Todd was born and you said you understood. We've had nurses and nutritionists to help you through every step. You've got no excuse to be doing this and your son will pay for it."

"Don't you talk to my wife that way, Mr. Doctor! This is our house!"

"All I'm trying to say to your wife is that her son has a serious disease, and if she wants him to grow and develop in the natural way, she'll have to listen to me. Can I ask you *why* you aren't following the diet?"

"We turned to the Lord more than we ever did before when Todd was born and you scared us, when you were telling us to put all our hope on witchcraft and shit that probably didn't work anyway. Reverend Shrike at the New Light Hope Center helped us. He proved things to us when you didn't prove *nothin'* to us."

Of course. Dr. Hanft had heard of the New Light Hope Center before. Many people in Shale considered it a cult.

“Do you want me to show you the damn blood tests? Or maybe I can remind you of your son’s *condition* right now. What does it take? Is your Reverend a doctor?”

The doctor had never imagined such opposition when he’d thought of the challenges he’d face in treating PKU. To him, it seemed like the Planks simply didn’t care. And it was probably all because of that weird church.

“Bull shit. We can take care of our son. We know what feels right. All you know are dollar signs and big words we don’t get. The Reverend speaks to us in our language and he understands us. We understand him.”

“Understand this: If you don’t listen to me, you will have a retarded son.”

The doctor was too angry at first to think about what he could do to get the Planks to listen to him. But he took a moment to slow his heart down. His PKU patient was not going to become retarded, no matter what his parents and their church thought. He had to be calm. Suddenly, he had an idea.

“Look, can I talk to your Reverend? Maybe, maybe I could go to service this Sunday and have a good long talk with him.”

Both Margaret and Ernest smiled. The doctor was surprised, since he’d thought the Planks would want him to stay far away from their church. He was a little worried about what he might find there, but it was worth it. If he could get the Reverend to understand the importance of the PKU diet, he might help the state’s first PKU patient from being remembered as a total failure.

“That’s a great idea, Doctor! The Reverend is a very smart man—he could talk with anyone about *anything*. And he loves it when we bring new people into the church!” Ernest said.

“You should come Sunday and talk to him before his sermon. He can explain to you our beliefs and why we aren’t following the food rules.”

The entire situation seemed ludicrous to Dr. Hanft, but he couldn’t fool himself; What Reverend Shrike thought was important to Todd’s long-term health, since the Planks certainly trusted him and would listen to him more than any doctor, and in fact already had. Dr. Hanft had told himself beforehand that he had to be careful. He’d planned out what he might say so as to keep the reverend on his side. Everyone in Shale knew about this church, they knew about the congregation. They were sometimes hard for outsiders to deal with, and Dr. Hanft was definitely still an outsider.

He had come to Shale from Nova Scotia 15 years ago as part of a program to bring available American and Canadian doctors to at-need rural communities in the states. The opportunity had been frightening but intriguing from the perspective of a researcher; there were often medical anomalies in small, rural towns that no one on the outside had a chance to study. Now Dr. Hanft had found his anomaly, and he wasn’t going to let a backwater reverend ruin his research.

That Sunday, the doctor dressed in his finest tweed and cautiously made his way to the New Light Hope Center. He hadn’t been to church since he was young, and even then, it had been Catholic, and so he didn’t have much of an idea for what to expect, except from the Shale Hospital gossip vine. Reverend Shrike was ready with a smile at 9

in front of the chapel, 30 minutes before the service began, and he was friendly from the outset, even though the doctor was obviously uncomfortable.

“Margaret and Ernest said you had some things you wanted to talk about, Doctor. So why don’t you come with me back to my office and we can have it out before I hold service. And I hope you’ll stay for that. Get a feel for our church.”

The Reverend smiled and it seemed very genuine. Dr. Hanft calmed down a little and followed him back to his office. The reverend had an innocence about him, a sort of comforting light that warmed the doctor. Once they had sat down and talked about a local draught and the upcoming county elections, and the reverend had offered him some coffee, the discussion of Todd’s condition began.

“So tell me Doctor, can you tell me about this disease, Todd’s sickness?”

Dr. Hanft didn’t know where to start, but the reverend seemed pleasant enough so far. The truth might be the best place, and he liked talking about genetics anyway.

“Well, Reverend, I just want to be clear on something. If I talk about genetics, do you know what I mean at all?”

“Well, I won’t lie to you. That doesn’t even ring a tiny bell.”

“Well, no worries. Most people who aren’t scientists wouldn’t know.”

Dr. Hanft carefully described genetics and the special PKU diet and it seemed like the Reverend understood, because he showed interest and asked intelligent questions. The man had gone to college, and he’d obviously learned something about rationalism. Dr. Hanft felt secure and hopeful for most of the conversation. And then there was a snag and an explosion towards the end, a few minutes before both of them went into the chapel.

“So I have one burning question for you, Doctor. Can you tell me what it is that operates all of this, this *gene* thing? What do you say *pushes* it, pushes *genetics*? What’s in charge?”

This was a question Dr. Hanft had been waiting on for some time, waiting on it from anyone. A few weeks ago, he had gone to a medical research conference in Louisville, and he’d listened to young researchers pitching the idea of sexual antagonism, or the competition of male and female genes in human development. Of course there were other things pushing evolution, and some of them were clearer and less complex, but the male and female antagonism was new and it was exciting to the doctor. Regardless, though, it wasn’t a simple one, or necessarily an appropriate one.

“There’s lots of things that push it, Reverend. All kinds of messy science I don’t want to bore you with. There is one thing though that might not be too messy—I think it’s really exciting. Some people think that one thing that pushes genetics and evolution has to do with what they call *antagonism* between mother genes and father genes. It’s really remarkable.”

He’d gotten too excited and he immediately realized when he heard it out loud from his own voice that sexual antagonism was much too complicated to talk about with the Reverend, with any member of the general public. This research was hot off the press, and most scientists probably hadn’t even heard of it, let alone decided that they believed it. There wasn’t much data, and genetics were still a jungle for any research, but it was a very interesting idea.

“So it’s man versus woman?”

Reverend Shrike looked confused of course, but his question made it seem like he was at least paying attention. And he was definitely interested in the concept. Dr. Hanft decided to keep going. He'd started it, after all.

“Well, no. It's more like the interplay between the male genes and the female genes. It might, I don't know how to say this. It might lead to stronger people.”

“You mean if the men win? Because they're stronger?”

The doctor thought about it, and it might have made for sense for him to simply tell Reverend Shrike that he was correct, that men win because they're stronger. Unfortunately, he decided that he would provide an example.

“It's not about that, Reverend. It's like, let me think. Like if you tried two different types of sermons, one that was gentle and one that was tough. And in the end, the members of your congregation who came to both sermons are better, right, because they had the rough one and the gentle one pushing and pulling at the same time. They get the important message and it makes them stronger.”

“What in God's name are you talking about? Are you trying to bring this medical garbage into my sermons? You've never even heard one!”

It was too late. The doctor hoped he could still change the subject.

“Oh, that was a really bad example. It gets complicated, and they're nowhere near a complete understanding—this is brand new research. But some scientists think it's the only reason that we have male and female. But that's all boring doctor-talk. You know, we should talk about Todd and not his genes.”

Reverend Shrike made a loud, dismissive voice as he adjusted in his chair and put his elbows on the desk, knocking papers to the floor. Dr. Hanft readied himself for defense.

“Now listen here, Doctor-man,” the Reverend said as he crossed his arms. “I think you’re wrong about all this. Number one, you think it’s *science* that pushes out men and pushes out women. The whole reason we have men and women is because our Lord made man and he made woman. Read the Bible. I’ve got mine right here if you need it. *Genesis*. Start there. Take notes.”

Dr. Hanft was not a religious man, but he didn’t mind pretending if it meant helping his young patient.

“Reverend, I understand what you mean, and I just got a bit wrapped up in my own tongue. I’m sorry. What I meant was, God works in interesting ways, and the differences between males and females are just good examples of that. When you start breaking it down and trying to understand how it all works, it’s truly spectacular.”

Reverend Shrike uncrossed his arms and noisily put the bible into his top desk drawer. Dr. Hanft could tell that he’d made a mistake.

“Yeah, that’s exactly where I thought you were going. All of this *how* and breaking down every blessed process to half-cocked science theories. That’s how you doctors and *scientists* are. If our Lord had wanted us to understand every friggin’ step of his plan, he would have told us. Instead, you’ve got sinners pretending like they’re God, forgetting that only he knows everything. It’s horse manure, pure horse manure.”

“Reverend, I’m sorry if I offended you.”



Dr. Hanft hoped that he hadn't ruined everything as the Reverend breathed hard and ran his hand through his silver mane. He had to get the Reverend to accept him, to tell the Planks that their son had to follow the PKU diet.

"God has to forgive you for any digressions, not me. Now we gotta go. My sermon starts in a few minutes and you should listen up good. Let's go in the chapel. You sit in one of the first few rows with Margaret and Ernest and I'll go on stage with Todd."

Upon entering the chapel, the Reverend picked up Todd from his parents and went to the stage, and Dr. Hanft took a seat beside the Planks. The New Light Hope Center had been converted from an old Baptist church and there were still stained glass windows and golden brown pews. There was a microphone stand and a few old-looking and red velvet cushioned chairs, but the stage was mostly empty, except for a deep and wide white baptismal pool at the center of the front stage with a large and worn wooden board across it, as if to keep people from falling in.

Dr. Hanft could tell by looking around at the 40 or so members around him in the chapel that he didn't have any patients in the church besides the Planks. These weren't the types of people you could forget. They were dressed normally for the most part, but there was an unmistakable intensity about them. It was in their eyes, and it was in their stern faces. It was in the tightness of their jaws, of their shoulder blades. They were looking at the Reverend, but they were seeing beyond him, beyond everything, and they were anxious, uncomfortable. Angry even. The doctor hadn't noticed during Todd's checkups, but as he looked beside him, he realized that Margaret and Ernest fit in very well in the New Light Hope Center.

“Happy God’s day, my friends!” the Reverend said into his microphone. It was much louder than necessary, but the collective response greeting of the congregation was louder.

“Before I start, I want to introduce you to a visitor we have today. My friend in Christ over here in the front is Dr. Reginald Hanft. I brought him here today because he’s got ideas about little Todd Plank, here, our little warrior for Jesus. He’s all the way from Canada, and he says he wants to help Todd. Let’s say hello.”

The congregation made a little noise of hesitant greeting, but they could tell that their Reverend didn’t like Dr. Hanft’s style of help. They would get ruder, but Dr. Hanft was already about to get up and run as large angry men and fierce women turned to give him almost friendly scowls. The Planks had moved down the pew and didn’t seem to notice him, as if they didn’t want to be associated with the outcast in front of their fellow church members.

“Even though we’re glad to have him in church, his ideas could use some work. We don’t need some foreign doctor turning our little boys into women. Next he’ll be dressing Todd in a jumper and making him carry one of those sun umbrellas.”

Dr. Hanft stiffened under heavy, menacing laughter from all around him.

“But we know how to do deal with problems like this and we’ll do that right off. We can ask our LORD and let him speak through us. Let the spirit take us over, use us spread the word. Just let it out!”

The congregation burst into crowded praise. Dr. Hanft loosened his tie and wiped his forehead as the church members around him hooped and hollered like wild canines.

Reverend Shrike had stopped talking and seemed to be barking back at them. Dr. Hanft had heard of this before—it was what some people called speaking ‘in tongues.’

“Well, the doctor is a doctor, and even though he thinks that doctors know more than us, I think we can prove him wrong this morning. He’s got some funny ideas about man and woman, but we know the truth. You might remember from a few weeks ago during our Man of Christ and Woman of Christ classes before service. The ones that me and Mrs. Shrike taught. What did we all learn?”

“Men are men!” screamed most of the men in the chapel, including Ernest.

“Women are women!” screamed the women, including Margaret.

The doctor thought they were all insane. He gripped his legs and tried to focus on an intricate stained glass window on the left side of the chapel. He recognized the scene, but couldn’t identify it. It had been too long.

“That’s right,” Reverend Shrike thundered. “The man fights the feminine path of weakness from the very beginning, in the mother’s womb. Aint that right, men? Let me know how it is! Let this doctor know how it really is!”

The men in the congregation began to howl in unison with a starting whoop from Reverend Shrike. It was remarkable to Dr. Hanft just how much Reverend Shrike had distorted what he’d told him. But that wasn’t enough to keep from focusing on the behavior of those around him. He jumped as a hefty bald man in the pew behind him put his chubby red face into the doctor’s ear and wordlessly growled.

“And sisters in Christ, you’re no more men than our men are women right? I want you to scream, and let us all know how much you need your man! God gave you to your man so he could protect you. Show us how much you need protecting!”

The women let out a terrible screech in unison. A redhead in the front row stood up with a jerk and threw herself to the ground. As she rolled around and howled, more women started throwing themselves to the ground in front of their pews, squeezing themselves tightly and, in some cases, blubbering as if they couldn't speak English. Most of them were crying through their blubbers.

“Women are weak at the core so they have to watch what they eat, what they put in those delicate frames. It's true, and I get it, God gets it, but this watching what you eat is mainly a weak thing to do, a womanly thing to do. And our Todd is not a woman, now is he?”

The doctor was worried that some of the church members were seizing and he didn't know what to do, especially when Margaret joined in, more passionately even than any of the other women. Her eyes were rolled back into her head as she fell to the floor moaning.

“Todd doesn't have to follow some womanly diet, doesn't have to worry about it at all. What I'm going to do for you all, for the Planks, is to tell a story. This is a story about how Todd's life can be, how it *will* be as long as Margaret and Ernest don't lose the true faith, as long as they don't get bumbled up with doctors and medicine. This is a story from our LORD.”

As she lay on the floor, Margaret stopped rolling. Reverend Shrike had told her and Ernest this story before, had told it for years now, but it was nice to hear it again. She even liked to use her imagination and add parts to the fantasy.

The Reverend began.

“Todd ate just the way every other little boy eats. Before his mother or father had time to do anything but pray, Todd had grown to the right size and was ready by first grade to go to school without a special assistant. Margaret always knew he was smart, but he showed just how smart he was in his classes, getting perfect scores on math and science tests and the like. His teachers visited the house sometimes just to say *good job* on Todd’s natural smartness.”

Margaret was already gone. She didn’t have to even listen to Reverend Shrike anymore, because she could imagine a wonderful life for her son as if it had really happened, as if it were happening now. She was in a state of ecstasy, and she was oblivious to everything but her own ideas of Todd’s future. She couldn’t help but to imagine entire situations, entire conversations.

“Todd just, just gets things,” Margaret could imagine Mrs. Dyer saying. She had been Shale Elementary’s only third grade teacher for years and even though this would be her first visit, in Margaret’s dream, the Planks would be used to teacher’s visits by now. “He can already write long essays, and the year’s not half over yet!”

“Ernest and me can’t even write good now. And our boy’s just out of second grade!”

“You should be proud of him.”

Margaret knew she would bite her lip to keep a ridiculous grin from tearing across her face. She could imagine Mrs. Dyer looking completely unsuspecting in a long red dress or maybe a blue one.

“Did you know, Miss Dyer, that Todd’s got a condition?”

“What? No! What’s wrong?”

Margaret knew she would love telling people about Todd's fake disease. She would never be proud of it, of course, but people would always be impressed with his achievement in spite of his supposed condition.

"He's got something called PKU. You heard of it?"

"PKU? No, I don't think I have. Is it like it near-sightedness?"

"No, Miss Dryer. It's a sickness you're born with and the doctors tell you that if you don't eat a special expensive diet that you'll turn mentally retarded when you grow. We showed them!"

Margaret pictured Mrs. Dyer's mouth opening up into a surprised circle between huge brown curls hanging on her face.

"What do you mean, mentally retarded? But Todd is my favorite student! He doesn't have any learning disability at all."

"Nope, not at all. We told his doctors that if we just left it in God's hands, he'd take care of our boy. We're devout and Todd's been taken care of."

"And you didn't have him follow a special diet?"

"Nope, not at all. We had some trouble at first and the doctors were mean to us, but we just kept believing and he got better and better.

"Well, I know I'm a teacher and there's a separation of church and state, but I have to say, the Lord must have something to do with this."

Margaret knew she would take pride in how much of the truth Todd showed to everyone. These days, not everyone grew up loving or even believing in God. Her son's talents and intelligence in the face of a horrible disease was exactly what it would take to make a doubter stop doubting.

Todd would definitely keep his spot at the top of his class all the way until he was ready to graduate. His mother would tell people that he made it seem easy, but she knew that it would take lots of hard work to get the type of grades that Todd would get. He would be one of the most successful graduates ever to leave Shale Public High School, Margaret envisioned.

She could see Ernest and herself sitting proudly in the small gymnasium at Todd's high school graduation, tingly and proud. She could see Todd walking over to them just before the ceremony would begin in his bright blue gown and hat and honors sash to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"You'll be one of the only Planks who's done high school," Margaret would say. "Hell, and you're going to college! You're going to be somebody."

"All of us are somebody, mom."

Her son would not be an arrogant young man, not at all.

"But you're really going to make it! You're going to have a good job and you're not going to have to worry," Ernest would say with a grin.

"And Reverend Shrike was right," Margaret knew she would say triumphantly.

"Damn right he was right!" Ernest would respond, just as triumphantly.

Todd might shift a little. He wouldn't be a boy who liked to hear his father curse. But on an exciting day like today he would definitely let it slide.

"You get ready, my big graduate! Pull that golden sash across your shoulder and walk up there like you mean it."

Even now, as Margaret lay on the floor of the New Light Hope Center, when Todd wasn't even four yet, the moment that knew she would be waiting on for 18 years

began in her mind's eye. Their son would walk to the stage and take his seat next to the principal and about thirty other graduates. Todd would have been selected as the best of all of them and he would deserve it. After three long speeches from important community members, it would be his turn to take the microphone.

“And now everyone, we’re going to hear from the senior class Valedictorian, Todd Plank,” Mr. Jennings, the principal of the Shale Public High School, would say. There would be a round of applause that seemed too loud for the small room.

Todd would have grown into a tall young man with dark black hair like his father—Margaret could see every detail. He would stand with poise at a lectern in front of the Shale Public High School gymnasium as he prepared to speak.

“We did it, you guys!” There would be another pleasant round of applause. “It might have been boring sometimes, and it might have been long, but we did it.”

Margaret could see herself crying, but she could also see herself promising Ernest that she wouldn’t blubber.

“I want to make a confession. When I was born, the doctors told my mom and dad that they had given me a rare disease. They called it P-K-U, like it was a tax form or something like that.” No one would laugh because they would be so shocked. Todd would be the image of perfect health and a serious sickness wouldn’t make sense to anyone. “Maybe I was born with genes for it, but probably not. Either way, I’m fine. We prayed through it. And I didn’t eat any special formula like the doctors wanted. I ate what my momma cooked for me.”

There *would* be laughter this time, and Margaret and Ernest would feel like local superstars. They would follow their hearts and their son would make it big time. PKU



was just a myth or a scary dream and it would never kept Todd from eating whatever he wanted and growing up into a smart, holy young man.

“But really, my mom and dad, they really risked a lot. They knew that the doctors were just trying to make up problems to fight with. And they stood up to them and...”

Todd would start to say, but he would trail off and step back to cry into his hands in front of the whole audience. Margaret knew she would start to bawl, and she might even see a single tear in her silent husband’s eye.

Before long, her strong son would regain his composure and step back up to the microphone.

“I couldn’t be where I am today without my parents. Because of them, and because of my Lord Jesus Christ, I’m going to be one of the first people in my family to finish high school and plan to go to college. And I already know I’m going to be a holy man, a preacher!”

Even though she wasn’t really there yet, Margaret could hear the gymnasium crowding with applause. It would seem like there were a thousand people there. She wouldn’t be able to keep still in her chair. It was true--none of the Planks had ever thought about going to college, since most of them had never finished high school. Margaret had been the first in her family to finish and had tried to get Ernest to finish up as well, but it wasn’t in his blood. He knew he would be a farmer for the rest of his life, probably growing corn and tobacco on someone else’s land the whole time, and he was fine with that. Margaret knew that Todd would show such promise in school she would encourage him to apply to college and make something of himself.

Margaret could already taste the excitement that she would feel as she read Todd's letter telling him that he had gotten into college in Lexington, less than an hour away from home. Her fantasy became fuzzy, less developed at this point. There might be a pretty God-fearing girl Todd would court pretty heavily and bring home. She would come to the house in a pink floral print dress and with the most beautiful blond hair Margaret had ever seen, like a daisy, and perfect for Todd. Her name would probably be something like Ruth or Jo Ann, and she would be able to cook almost as well as Margaret. She would be the type of girl who had always dreamed of being a preacher's wife.

Margaret came out of her bright fantasy with a loud bump in the chapel at New Light Hope Center as she hit her head on the pew beside Dr. Hanft. She had started rolling around again, and he reached down to help her. He automatically laid her back on the floor and put his finger behind her tongue even though she bit him and pushed as hard as she could with her tiny arms. She may not have been in the middle of a seizure, but she certainly looked like she was, and Dr. Hanft couldn't just ignore her. Ernest was no help even though he wasn't on the floor, since he wasn't paying attention and was speaking in tongues like the others.

Amid animalistic cheers from the congregation, Reverend Shrike pulled Todd up from his chair on stage in front of the congregation and placed his small frame on the end of the board over the big white baptismal pool. He held the boy still for a good while until he stood up straight and then released him.

"You see this? This little man can do it all on his own! And he hasn't followed any special diets, hasn't watched what he ate like a woman. Let's bring Jesus down and

get our little man in Christ to walk across this platform I've set up, right here in front of his whole congregation! Come on now! Can we have a round of applause?"

Screeches and fierce prayers shot from every direction, so loud that Dr. Hanft had trouble believing he wasn't in a crowded thousand-person stadium. He thought about getting up, but the intensity that had built around him had become difficult to stand in. Todd's parents obviously weren't in their right senses, so he felt responsible for stopping the chaos on the stage.

"Just keep believing, all my faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, keep believing. Todd may fall, but in the end, the love of our LORD, will keep him above water."

"What are you going to do? Stop this!" Dr. Hanft yelled, even though the congregation ignored him and kept their focus on his young and tiny patient above the baptismal pool.

"He'll make it across, and if he doesn't, GOD will pull him right back up."

Dr. Hanft jumped from his seat and headed for the stage. He didn't know what he would do. Todd could very easily drown in the baptismal pool since he couldn't walk and he couldn't swim, and the doctor couldn't watch this. But before he could get to the stage, one of the huge men of the congregation grabbed him and squeezed him against his heavy torso. All Dr. Hanft could smell were cigarettes and sweaty focus.

"Let go of me! What you're doing is insane!"

Todd wobbled on the platform above the baptismal pool. He didn't seem scared and in fact looked more aware than Dr. Hanft had ever seen him, more aware than he should have at his age in fact. But the doctor knew that there was no way he could walk across the platform.

“You’ve had your chance to talk, Doctor Man. And we have no clue what you’re talking about, and our LORD tells us it’s wrong. So shut your mouth. God will grab this little boy and he will stand and he will walk!”

“This is ridiculous. He can’t walk! What are you going to do if he falls in? Let him drown?”

Reverend Shrike looked through the doctor being held in the front row and held his chest high.

“Jesus will be with him and he will raise him to a place where all he can hear is the beautiful song of our LORD. It is a gorgeous melody, with words all of us could understand, a song with truth that all of us can hear. That is how the Heaven of our Lord God Almighty will begin.”

Cheers filled the chapel and bounced off everything. Dr. Hanft felt it in his legs and in his chest as Todd took his first step.

Killing Kristine Three Times

\*\*\*\*\*

This won't be happy and this won't be fun. But it's informative, I promise.

Before I jump into the meat, a little background is necessary. Richard Principe came into my life as my favorite professor, but he was so much more than that in the end. I was an English lit major and a snobby member of the varsity women's swim team in college when he was my teacher, but he got me interested in health, and even though I haven't talked to him for a very long time, I owe him a lot. For one thing, he got me to direct my attention away from my sorority and immature boys who didn't deserve my attention. Dr. Principe was the only one who got my attention in the end, and he's still got it, for good reason. The two of us were very close.

My parents are both retired doctors, but I never thought I could get interested in their method of ruining their lives. And I never did, but Dr. Principe taught me that there is still a lot to be done for health and well-being. And I've been working to do it now since I met him.

Some real changes have to happen in our country, and Dr. Principe, that wonderful man, knew that better than anyone. In order to do my part in spreading that message, I'll do what I do best—I'll tell a story. In fact, I'll tell three. I've waited several years to do this, but it's time. I could talk mostly about *his* life, but he was brilliant and he is not a good example of something negative. His wife Kristine was different. She's a good example.

These are stories about a death. One is true, and the others are symbolic, but don't worry. It won't be a mystery which is which. The main thing I want you to realize is that

because of what her wonderful husband Dr. Principe believed, deaths like Kristine's should not happen again. And while I'm at it, I'll appreciate killing a woman I hate again and again.

So what was it that Dr. Principe believed in, and what didn't he believe in? Some people have claimed that the elimination of aging and inevitable death was Dr. Principe's ultimate goal, what with his concern for lifelong health, but that isn't true at all. Anyone in Psychology 457 could tell you that.

Every year, Dr. Principe's favorite seminar to teach was a popular fall semester course called "Psychology 457: Well-being for the Lifetime." He spent a large part of the course sharing his own research on inflammation and worry, and his stressed-out psychology and biology students were consistently intrigued. They also benefited on his suggestions for overall good health and prevention of disease. The lectures were just as intriguing as the readings.

"So I'm assuming that everybody read all 500 pages of Degradine's book?" Dr. Principe asked one day around midterm of my favorite class. It was at the beginning of several weeks on the same topic. The doctor and I were already quite close by this point in the semester, even though we'd only met at the beginning. But we weren't overt about it out of fairness to the other students—Dr. Principe was a very fair man.

There was laughter in the room. We'd only had three days to read a large and complicated book by a scientist who thought he would end biological aging within 20 years. I'd read it, but I was in the minority like usual. It was a shame, because Degradine's ideas for putting an end to biological aging were fascinating and scary. They could really get you thinking. Dr. Principe didn't like them at all.

“I know you didn’t. But I asked you to just so I could talk about what a crazy moron this guy is and nobody could say I wasn’t giving you a chance to make up your own minds.”

“So you think Degradine is a moron?” I asked. I was young and stupid, and was surprised at first. Dr. Principe and I hadn’t talked about this during one of our regular talks outside of class, so I didn’t yet know where he stood.

“Don’t get me wrong. Degradine has some good ideas in this book. He might be behind an end to cancer, and he might help lubricate the drug approval ceremony, all kinds of shit. But does anyone here really think that unlimited lifespans are a good idea?”

There was more laughter and people shook their heads with stupid grins. I couldn’t take it. When I read Degradine’s book, I hadn’t formed much of an opinion. But Dr. Principe knew it was a terrible idea and I wanted to set straight my classmates.

“It’s ridiculous! We would run out of room. And evil dictators would live forever. Degradine doesn’t even worry about how to handle that stuff—he says it’s the job of other people.”

“Yeah, those are concerns. There are tons of them though. Like for one thing, anything like this would cost a *lot*. And that means there would probably be a lot of people who couldn’t afford it. What would that be like?”

I loved him for the way he was able to look beyond his own wealth and think of those who were less fortunate. He was in fact very wealthy. The University paid him a great deal, even before he reached the height of his proclivity, and his wife made a lot of money as a lawyer in the city. A blonde in the front row straightened up and raised her



hand. She actually read most of the assignments and had something obnoxious to say about them. She was a business student, and I'm pretty sure she did a lot of cocaine.

“No. I read most of this. If Degradine figures this out, he points out that a government would cover the costs. It would kill a country's competitive advantage if only the rich people could live forever.”

Dr. Principe chuckled.

“Competitive advantage? Is that what we're worried about? Ever heard of health care rationing? Have you ever seen what it's like to be poor and sick?”

“We're not all liberals.”

“Yeah, I shouldn't have turned this into a political debate. I apologize. But there are other problems that are harder to argue about. Why don't we talk about what life would be like if you thought you had to live and work forever. My wife says that if she were healthy and young that she'd love to practice law forever. What about you guys?”

“It depends on what I looked like,” the business blonde said. “If I were an old hag, I wouldn't want to live no matter if I were tired or not.”

“Maybe you didn't read that carefully after all. Degradine wants to repair humans like you might repair a nice old Mustang. He doesn't see people looking old at all no matter how long they're under maintenance.”

“Yeah right,” a doofy guy in the back of the room said. He probably never read anything, let alone homework.

I jumped in.

“No, if you’d read it, you’d know that Degradine is twisted genius. He’s got it all mapped out. You would look young forever as long as you kept going to your treatments. No wrinkles at all. But looks aren’t everything.”

Dr. Principe agreed with me.

“Looks *aren’t* everything. But something tells me that people wouldn’t mind spending a lot of money just to look young forever.”

As we talked about it, some people didn’t listen very well. But I walked out of class that day convinced of how terrible an infinite life might be. After class, during one of the regular chats that Doctor Principe and I had, he talked about Kristine. He thought she would be a good example of someone who would not fare well in an ageless society, and we devised a story about it. So what if Kristine managed to die even though she was supposed to live forever? I’m going to take you through an imaginary scenario, and I hope it gives you an idea of what things might be like if some people never had to age. Fast forward about 70 years for this exercise. But don’t imagine Kristine or Dick as elderly and feeble. Imagine them as eternally youthful, unblemished by age.

\*\*\*

## I.

*First, a nightmare*

Kristine's job made her want to puke, especially this Friday. To be fair, almost everyone hated his or her job, but there was only so much litigation that someone could charge for without losing faith.

A few weeks ago, she had successfully sued a man's ex-wife for merely punitive damages because of a messy divorce. And then there was the case she was working with this morning that had her helping a woman gain possession of a house that belonged to her ex-husband, a small ranch-style home that he'd bought 15 years after their divorce.

"This isn't the old days," the client, a blonde firecracker named Brooklyn, said to Kristine. "I've got the money and both of us have the time to get everything that motherfucker thinks is his."

"Well, I can't promise," Kristine said. "You've been divorced for a while."

"What does that matter? I hate him. Will keep on him until he's on the street like a mort. Just help me do that, and I'll pay you well for however many years it takes."

*She doesn't even need anything,* Kristine thought. *She just wants to hurt him as long as she can.* Without limits to their life spans, the rich were very efficacious at finding new pieces of property and offenses to sue over, perhaps as a means of feeling alive, or at least functional. Thanks to CAOST (Complementary and Operative Senescence Termination), some life just kept continuing, but everything was sterile, bitter.

“Are you listening?” Brooklyn asked from the other side of Kristine’s desk while adjusting her red sweater and straightening her hair with a grin. “We need to get this taken care of so I can decide how to spend the money I get from his Ferrari. I think I’m going to get an indoor pool. I’ve always wanted that”

*People just get greedier and greedier the longer they live,* Kristine decided. *She probably won’t even use a pool. Just for show. But I should get one. I haven’t been in the water for years and it might make me feel like I’m back in college, back in days that were exciting, when I was a swimmer.* All of a sudden, Kristine noticed that Brooklyn had calmed down and noticed Kristine’s beloved Tiffany’s Lotus table lamp on the corner of her desk. She had won it at an antique auction weeks ago, and she was very proud of it.

“Where did you get this?” Brooklyn asked as she gazed at the ornate lamp. Kristine could see the red and pink panels reflected on Brooklyn’s blue eyes. “I *will* find one of these for my new house.”

That’s when it hit Kristine. Dr. Principe was right; she wasn’t much different from her clients. She unceremoniously asked Brooklyn to leave and pulled a large bottle of gin and a narrow glass from her desk drawer. After Brooklyn had promised to find a different attorney and slammed the door, her coworker Emily slipped in crookedly.

“I’m sorry to burst in, but I have to know what that was about,” Emily said. Kristine could tell that she’d been drinking too. “It’s been so boring for me for weeks. Same ole, same ole.”

“Oh, same ole here too,” Kristine said, taking a swig of her gin. “I’ve decided that I quit. I *can’t* let myself be like that selfish bitch. And I’ve got some things to work out.”

“I think it’s too late. We might not be too different than that bitch. I guess, I mean, that, I might need to leave too. I don’t want to end up like Mr. Merrill.”

Henry Merrill had been a client of Emily’s who had offed himself a few weeks ago. It had been reasonably surprising, as far as that went. He’d been a cheerful fellow, even though he was determined to own a piece of most complex property in the city.

“Yeah,” Kristine said. “You wouldn’t want that.”

“I don’t know, though,” Emily said, looking off as if she’d just had a great idea. “It must be the most sexual thing you could feel, sexual like we don’t even know.”

“That’s a jump. Whoa.”

“Ronald and me tried some weird *shit* last weekend. I’m talking masks and leather and matches, I mean we’ve tried all kinds of stuff for a long time. But last weekend, the whole time, all I could keep thinking about is how we’d never have to worry about burial plots, or living wills.”

“Are you serious?” Kristine asked, not really that surprised. She normally wouldn’t have talked to Emily about these types of things. She didn’t even know that Kristine had once had a daughter. The workplace normally was for miserable work, and everyone was content with that, because getting into someone’s personal life these days was usually a mistake for one’s own tolerable mood. But Kristine was starting to get very drunk and had decided that she was about to quit anyway.

“You know, I only thought the *mundane* things,” Emily said. “What more is there? I think he was bored too. I definitely get the whole wanting-to-shake-it-up-thing.”

“Let me get this straight. Are you saying you think it’s a good idea to...kill yourself?” asked Kristine as she took a drink of her gin and gazed at the bright colorful pieces of her Lotus Lamp. “Just so you’re not bored?”

*That lamp will last forever, as long as I do if I take care of it, Kristine thought, But it’s so boring keeping it from breaking. I just want to see those red and yellow and green pieces of glass broken up like a car accident.* As Kristine stared at her lamp, she realized that she understood why some people would want to end it all with a spark, even though everyone knew they could just stop having CAOST treatment if they wanted to let their bodies die.

But discontinuing CAOST had become a terrifying prospect when everyone valued indefinite youth and some people could get it. A slow, degenerate and painful death full of uncertainty was not a good cap for a very cold life that was never supposed to end. In the old days, people had been content with slow self-destruction as they burned cancer into their skin or smoked or ate so much that their bodies forgot how to process all the sugar and cholesterol. But once those problems were no longer threats, when some could just go fix a problem with a regular treatment, many wealthy individuals desired something more, a *flash* and a direct certainty.

*I can’t believe I spent so much on a lamp. I’m no different than that bitch who just left. I’m going to smash it. But it’s so expensive. I don’t think I’ll be smashing it,* Kristine thought.

“I always thought it was a waste of good money,” she said, turning her attention back to Emily. “You spend all that money every year and then you want to throw it all into the ground?”

“I’m just saying I get it. I mean, we can’t *ask* anyone. But there must be something. People are doing it all the time. Except morts. Morts aren’t.”

“How do you know?” Kristine asked. She was suddenly interested for personal reasons. “Do you know any?”

“I read an article about rates,” Emily said, as if she were an expert. “I guess when your life is going to end on you, it’s a silly thought to push things along any faster.”

Kristine had read articles about morts, too. Probably a lot more than Emily. Economists agreed that their regular, age-ridden deaths freed up resources that were increasingly rare, even among the rich. They didn’t come right out and *say* it, but there were also hints that the high rates of non-mort suicides were necessary to keep everything from falling part. Kristine thought the government probably did their part to invoke a hefty suicide rate, but it wasn’t too difficult. Often it happened after having kids or picking up some dangerous or disgusting fetish and realizing that even the chronicles of children and bizarre sex wouldn’t shake things up in a real way.

“It would be silly,” Kristine said grimly with her face turned down towards her glass. “Basically eating, *breathing* is suicide for them. Plus, those animals kill each other,” Kristine said slowly, violently.

“It’s sad for them, isn’t it? To know you’re going to die, that your *children* and parents and everyone around you is probably going to die just because they can’t afford CAOST. That would make me want to kill someone.”

“Yeah, it’s miserable,” Kristine said. “But then you have *idiots* who decide that they’re too good for CAOST. Those are the ones that get me.”

“Yeah, there must be better ways to make political statements,” Emily said.

“Plenty of poor people are going to die miserable deaths. That’s enough of a statement for me.”

“I hate people who do that. This is your *life*. It’s worth fucking protecting.”

“Whoa, Kristine, calm down. You’re shaking. I guess you’re lucky though! If *they* get too stressed out, that could be *it* whether they like it or not.”

Kristine chuckled a little.

“You sound like my husband used to,” she said. “*Stress! Inflammation!* If people would just stop *worrying*, they’d be so much healthier. I love Dick, but when he gets his mind on something it takes too much to get him to shake it. To be honest, I’m glad Degradine shut him up.”

“Who’s Degradine?”

“You know, CAOST’s Lazarus.”

“Oh! I’d forgotten his real name. I guess he’s not somebody we should be forgetting about.”

“Yeah, well, lots of people would tell me I should hate him,” Kristine said, getting a little teary even through the gin. Whenever she talked about Dr. Principe anymore to anyone, all she really thought about was how sorry she was for what she’d done to him. “He screwed Dick over after they worked together for eleven years, got his funding cut. But Dick was convinced that keeping people healthy had to be a long and difficult process for their entire lives. *Prevention, nutrition, meditating, starting early*. Christ, I told him to do something useful, but he just kept on until no one would touch him.”



“Really? I’m sorry. It sounds like he was just giving it a good shot, the old-fashioned way. Just trying his way to help us live healthy forever.”

“It’s not the old-fashioned way. Christ. People were never like that,” Kristine said, swinging her gin in front of her like an erratic conductor’s baton. “But we can certainly live forever now.”

She laughed so hard that she almost dropped her glass. Emily became uncomfortable and got up to leave the room, claiming that she had some papers to file before the weekend.

“I hope you don’t laugh like that to his face.”

Kristine stopped laughing. She decided before she left the office a few minutes later that she had to do something to show Dr. Principe that she was sorry. She’d probably do it that weekend. She had an idea of what she would do, and it would feel good, but it would take preparation. As she left, she didn’t grab anything except for the pink Tiffany Lotus table lamp. She stopped at a few stores to get supplies for her night, and then headed home, hoping Dr. Principe would be there. He was often out lately, getting high or driving 130 miles an hour on the interstate. Or maybe both. He certainly wasn’t resigned to a long and boring life, or death, if he happened to have one.

Dr. Principe, unlike his wife, had loved his career, even when it was no longer of value to anyone. When he was young, he had helped to pioneer a biomedical concept about the deleterious effects of stress on the body, and the books he had written and the awards he had received had sent steady paychecks to the house. For awhile, he had been a name to know in biological research, and when he started the Institute for Preventative Well-Being, he and his colleagues had been certain that the paradigm in health care was

shifting, and a cheaper, more patient-based system of health was on the horizon in a nation that could not afford its expensive and ineffective method of disease care.

But it had been many years since the Institute had closed. After the advent and quick popularity of CAOST, people were more interested in the *reversal* of aging and infinite youthful maintenance than the prevention of any specific pathology or health status. It made perfect sense, since no one wanted to die or change what they ate, but a good deal of money was poured into preventative efforts and it was quite a waste when all the work was quickly tossed in favor of CAOST.

Dr. Principe had passed from university to university until it became clear that no one was going to fund research into anything that wasn't age related or an infectious disease. Luckily, he still got regular and heavy royalties on some of his patents that Degradine had used, and still used, in CAOST, such as his patent on a method to eliminate the threat of stem cell rejection during allogeneic transplants. The royalties helped him pay for CAOST, but he still had to work a terrible job to keep up.

"It's basically a janitorial position, but it's in the same lab where you did a lot of your work," the human resources director at Dr. Principe's old university had said with a pitiful stare when Dr. Principe realized that he was going to have to bring in more income. "I mean, it's not anything high-brow, but jobs are practically nilch and it's still nothing we'd give to a mort."

He was never the same after having to watch CAOST scientists take over his old labs. He often woke up sweating and even screaming in the middle of the night.

Kristine went into the house on that last Friday at work, and all the lights were off, even though she knew Dr. Principe was home. She could hear him talking to himself

in his bedroom soon after she walked in. It wasn't surprising, and she hoped she could make him forget about his worries. She thought about her husband's state of mind as she dropped her supplies by the front door and headed to the bathroom to start putting on bright makeup in the mirror.

"I keep having one of those nightmares where you just keep running but you can't stop," Dr. Principe had said to Kristine one night, less than a month ago, when he woke her up after a nightmare. "It's because of CAOST. It will never end."

Dr. Principe had done this before. *Half the world probably feels that way*, Kristine thought as she put on her lipstick in the bathroom mirror. *It makes sense*. Death becomes infinitely more terrifying once you believe that your relationship with it is an actual *battle*. Everyone used to talk about death like they were fighting it, but it wasn't really a fight, because no matter what, you couldn't get the upper hand. It was often slow, and everyone was doing it, so many people got over being afraid about it and even planned their lives accordingly. But throw into the mix the ability to actually fight, and it never feels right to lay the gloves down, even for a second.

"Why would you want that?" Kristine asked Dr. Principe, only slightly horrified. "Why would you want it to end?"

"It's *always* ending. Every fucking second. Every ten years, get cells, every 5 years, get grafts, every two years, do that and this and—"

"You get to live, Dick. It's worth it. What is wrong with you?"

"I think people were happier before."

“Stop! People were not happy getting miserable and dying. People who have to do it now aren’t happy at all. Getting old is a sickness. Don’t you remember what it was like when we thought we had to get old?”

“I remember pushing myself to get things done. And I remember imagining something *different* for us in twenty years.”

“Just shut up. You’re nothing but ungrateful”

“You see that? That’s what it’s done to us. It’s our religion and we can’t believe that it isn’t right.”

“That’s stupid. There’s no reason for us to have a religion.”

“No, because we’ve got one. And it tells us we never have to die and nothing ever has to change. Do you remember how Degradine used to talk about *new life spans* and *experiential renaissances*? Shit. People aren’t being reborn, they’re *working*. All the time, and they aren’t loving their extra--”

“Just stop then. Don’t go for your next op and see what you feel like in ten years!”

“Don’t think I’m brave enough to do that,” Dr. Principe said, putting his arms up. “I’m stuck just like you are, just like everyone. I’m terrified to think of stopping.”

“Then don’t.”

As Kristine finished her blush in the mirror and started putting her makeup away, she felt a renewed pang of guilt. In all the rush of activity, she had nearly forgotten that what she was about to do was because of the worst mistake of her life. She doubted it would be easy to truly apologize to Dr. Principe, but she would try.

So what was it, exactly, for which Kristine needed forgiveness? She thought about her terrible mistake as she went into her bedroom and pulled on her most expensive red

dress. Just three weeks before, she had been busying herself in the kitchen with vodka and lemons after a long and terrible day. She was giggling about how much money she spent on liquor when she wouldn't even buy Dr. Principe golf clubs.

All of a sudden, she heard a rustling at the front door and Dr. Principe came rushing into the house, more serious and more alive than Kristine had seen him for many, many years. It was attractive. Any woman would have liked it. His eyes were wide and there was sweat dripping from his neck.

“Somebody's got Rachel, and they want money.”

“Got her? Who has her?”

“I don't know who it is, but I think it's one of *them*. Who else?”

“Morts? How do you know they have her?”

“You can see the note. It says, *You can, can live as long as you can pay for it. And that's the way it's going to work for your daughter too,*” Dr. Principe read, choking on each word. “They made it look like a bill. We can almost afford what they're asking for.”

“Well almost doesn't work with ransom,” Kristine said sarcastically.

“We'll have to take out a loan then.”

“Yeah, because credit is bountiful,” Kristine said. Of course she wasn't serious. A loan could take years, and nothing was guaranteed. “Let's just take a loan from the bank.”

“What the fuck are we going to do then? They'll kill her!”

“Well, I thought she wanted to die!”

“How can you say that? She's your daughter!”

“We’ve tried for 30 years, maybe more. She won’t have anything to do with CAOST and last time I saw her, she already had wrinkles. She works with morts everyday. She wanted to die, so maybe we should let her.”

“This is *our* fault. They don’t want anything from her. They just want some of the money that her parents are spending on themselves!”

“How much longer could she really live Dick? Really?”

“It doesn’t *fucking* matter!”

“She’s over 50 now. Probably older. For morts, that’s ancient.”

“She is not a mort!”

“She wasn’t born that way, but now she *is*, Dick. All it means is that you let yourself die from aging. And that’s what she’s doing, just like all the whore mothers she’s helping with every sickly infant they pop out.”

“She’s a good girl, Kristine. She wants to help those women. She isn’t like us.”

“Right. We choose not to help people when they constantly spit consumers into a space that’s already full to the edges and not getting any emptier.”

“Do you think the kids are choosing that? She’s helping those children.”

Dr. Principe always thought of the less fortunate, unlike his wife.

“Yes, everyday, she’s helping poor mothers to fill the mort complexes with more and more short-lived pests,” Kristine said. “They shouldn’t be allowed to reproduce.”

“Speak for yourself. I bet they don’t leave their children to be murdered!”

“We don’t have the money, Dick!” Kristine said. “We tried to get her not to do this, but she took a risky job. If she cared about whether she lived or died, she’d be here with us right now and she wouldn’t have creases on her forehead.”

“You’ve got that fucking lamp,” he said. He had been very against the amount she’d spent. It was the most he’d ever seen spent on anything, especially furniture. “Sell that.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s one-of-a-kind. I spent almost 4 mill—”

“They’re going to kill your daughter and it’s a *lamp*.”

“That lamp will last longer than she will no matter if they kill her or not. And it will definitely look better for its age.”

“Fine, be a bitch! A psychotic, greedy bitch. Let them kill your daughter. I’m going to go figure something out.”

“She isn’t my daughter. My daughter chose to die years ago.”

Of course the poor man didn’t figure anything out, and one week later, they got word that their only daughter Rachel had been strangled and left outside the complex where she worked. Kristine had pent weeks before this pivotal moment in the bathtub trying to pretend that it didn’t happen.

Dr. Principe couldn’t afford CAOST without Kristine’s income, but their relationship had been wordless since Rachel’s death. Still, she thought she could get him to leave his room and come to her if she made the right noises.

She wanted to make up her daughter’s death to her husband, and she was ready. She brought the ladder out of the den closet, set it up in the bathtub and let the water start to run. While the tub filled, she plugged in the Tiffany’s Lotus table lamp with the long extension cord she’d bought earlier that afternoon and wrapped the cord around the doorknob to the bathroom before setting the lamp on top of the ladder.

She lay down in the tub under the ladder and began to scream as loud as she could. She would let Dr. Principe do it himself when he opened the door to the bathroom. She had decided that she would apologize by letting her intricately designed, multi-colored Tiffany's Lotus table lamp fall into the bathtub as she lay there.

"I think all swimmers imagine what it would be like to die in water."

She held her breath and laid her head back in the tub. The lamp and other things in the tub would be ruined, but without breaking a shard of their timeless and sparkling display.

\*\*\*

## II.

*Next, a fantasy.*

Please accept my apologies. That was a little over the top. Of course Kristine really died, but I may have gone too far. My mother went on and on about how *imaginative* the story was after she'd read it. She was concerned about Kristine's water suicide, however, and her last words. *There's hardly anything about swimming until the end, and then you have the woman drown herself because she's a swimmer? I hope you aren't thinking about suicide.* My father read the story and simply thought that I was insane. He kept getting caught up on things he didn't understand, things that weren't his business anyway. *I've seen that Tiffany's lamp in your room—where did you get it? It*



*must mean a lot to you if you're going to write a whole crazy story about it.* They will not be reading the rest of this story, even though they'd love to.

Like I said before, above all I'd like to honor a revolutionary, a wonderful man who was ahead of his time, and that means highlighting memorably what he thought was important, even if that means being extreme and colorful. I could go have gone into my personal bond with Dr. Principe, but readers couldn't understand. In the midst of our relationship, Dr. Principe bought me the Tiffany's Lotus lamp that my father mentioned, but it was just a symbol in my story, one of love and respect. The lamp *does* mean a lot to me, because it was given to me by somebody I cared for a great deal, but as far as most readers need be concerned, it was just a convenient prop to use. Nothing to it but its beauty.

In reality, CAOST and Degradine never succeeded, but that's because people like Dr. Principe were clear about how bad an idea like eternal youth is. But Dr. Principe's full range of contributions were not appreciated. Next, I'll create a world that's just as fictional as the one into which I just took you, but hopefully it's not so ridiculous. There's a lesson to be learned, just like in the last story.

Imagine a world where things have changed, and the idea of the mind-body connection in health has gained leverage. People are interested in what we can do *mentally* to affect health, and just like many other cultures have for thousands of years, the United States and other Western Nations are getting it. Also, *Prevention* of bad health finally seems promising to those interested in improving health while saving money. It is a new, healthier day. It's what Dr. Principe would have wanted.

Take yourself to the end of a different life for Kristine, one in this bright new world, one in which she would have been better for Dr. Principe and one that Kristine never would have deserved. This is a generous fantasy. Just like in the last story, she didn't look tired, didn't look worn, and, to make things more exciting, she was even smiling a little bit through her determination at the top of a beautiful cliff.

But she was going to die very soon, and of natural causes. Her daughter Rachel was at the bottom of the cliff looking up with Kristine's grandchildren Jane and Ryan and Dr. Principe. Several young great-grandchildren stood at the edge of the lake as well, just old enough to grasp realistically the solemnity of the situation. Their great-grandmother had once been an excellent lawyer, and a swimmer, a diver. She had traveled all around the world to push through new water, but this dive would be the last

"It's what makes me feel alive. You jump through the thick air for no time," she'd said to her heart doctor when he asked why she was so attached at her age to such an extreme form of exercise.. "It's just all that quick free-falling, and then right when you're about to *crash*, everything gets cold and quiet and safe. I hope everyone has a way to feel like that. It keeps me sane."

She used to regularly take the whole family on vacations to South America and Asia and all over the place just so she could dive from cliffs and without even making a splash in foreign water. Her body was still limber and wiry-looking because she had swum hard most days since turning 19, and even though her heart was about to stop, Rachel had trouble believing that she couldn't still jump up and dive even though she hadn't gone on a trip for almost three years. She'd never been frail, never been feeble,

and she still wasn't either of those things now, and there didn't seem to be a reason for her to act like an old woman. Her thick hair was dark brown without a drop of dye.

Of course, she *was* an old woman by the standards of some people. But those types of labels didn't mean much, because they were obsolete these days for most people. *If you can get up and live your life with passion*, Rachel thought, *there are other words for you*. Kristine's grandchildren loved her and they weren't ready to lose her so soon, since she had been just much a part of their lives as their mother had. Even before Rachel was born, Kristine had been a very busy lawyer, but she made time to spend time with her grandchildren every week. For years before they'd grown out of it, she'd taken them to Shakespeare in the Park every Saturday, and even lately when Rachel couldn't get off work, she'd helped Ryan move into his residence for college two hours away. Kristine was decidedly not an old woman unless that meant a vibrant pillar of life for her family.

Dr. Principe seemed to be taking this well. *Only Grandfather could treat this like a holiday*, Rachel must have thought. He and her mother had been married for quite some time, and yet he was smiling and laughing as if Kristine were simply taking a weekend dive in Georgia. Of course Rachel would have hated to see her mother in bed, waiting to die, but this seemed to be going too far.

Kristine and Dr. Principe had bought plane tickets for everyone and had told them that this might be their devoted matron's final journey, but they hadn't mentioned what was going to happen. They both knew that if they told the kids and grandkids and great-grandkids that, in the face of a genetic and terminal heart condition, Kristine was going to dive 64 feet into an Austrian lake, a height she'd never even dove before, it wouldn't have been productive. There would have been a fight over whether or not Kristine was

sane, which she was, and whether or not she was asking her family to help her to commit suicide, which she wasn't.

Two weeks before, the cardiologist had made it clear that her heart wouldn't last for more than a month for reasons she couldn't have controlled for, and she could already feel new circulation problems every morning as she got out of bed. It had been a good life, and she was ready for it to end.

"Why are you crying?" Dr. Principe asked his granddaughter Jane as she stood at the bottom of the cliff sniffing.

"I can't deal with it, that she's going to die," Jane said with her eyes fixed straight ahead. "And what am I supposed to say to my kids when I can't even accept it myself? They already love her so much. I thought she'd be here forever."

"Well I guess you haven't really had to say goodbye to anyone. But this is a good time to get used to it with your head up. You'll see a lot more death but it doesn't have to set you on fire."

"This isn't setting me on fire. I just feel like the world is ending and I'm helping it happen."

"That's silly. If this were the end of the world, you wouldn't be to blame. Your grandmother and I tricked you into this—if you had known what she was going to do, you never would have let her."

"She's not well," Ryan said. "And I can't believe we're just letting her do this."

"You have to put out that fire or you'll get sick. That's why your health partners have you do yoga and tai chi and meditation. You can use that now."

“That isn’t going to fix this,” Ryan said and then turned to Kristine above them. “Grandma! Get down! Your heart can’t take this!”

Kristine didn’t hear Ryan but she had heard what he was saying many times before now.

“I’m not going to let my heart stop just lying around waiting for it,” she’d told Rachel after she’d received her prognosis. She’d asked her to keep it from Jane and the others, but she knew that wasn’t likely. “I don’t care if it would wobble around for 20 more years. I’d rather wear out the machinery on my own terms!”

“If you let yourself get like this, you’ll feel it in your health,” Dr. Principe said to Jane under the Austrian cliff. “You won’t be able to take advantage of the good health your grandmother passed down to you and you’ll make her bad heart health genes more dangerous for you.”

“Granddad, this is *not* the time. We know you’ve helped people, we know you tell people not to feel bad, but we *need* it right now. This is about someone we love who might die right in front of us and we need to worry.”

Kristine poised herself for the dive and she looked beautiful with her pink bathing suit and well-formed and ripened body. As I imagine Kristine, I can almost imagine myself up there, getting ready for the most important dive, the dive where I hope to let go of the troubles and worries of all my life and finally rise above them. If you’re a swimmer, you’ll understand. Dr. Principe was not a swimmer, but he got it, and he proved it to me when he gave me my most cherished gift--the Tiffany’s Lotus Lamp.

It was during one of our regular after-class sessions. I won’t forget it.

“When I was in Asia studying the *Bhavana* rituals, I saw pictures of the lotus everywhere. Buddhists talk about the lotus a lot because they see it as divine. It’s an aquatic perennial flower, and it grows in the water. Even in the muddiest streams, it is at home and it is pristine. That’s what you remind me of.”

I brought my chair next to him and sat down so that I could see his eyes better.

“That’s beautiful, Dr. Principe but me? I don’t know what you see in me. What do you mean?”

He put his arm around me and I rested my head on his shoulder.

“I don’t know how many times you would come to me worried out of your mind. Flustered with troubling information, with inflammatory stress. And then a few days later I would see you at your swim match and you would step out of the water, clear and effervescent and serene, like you’d just finished the best week of your life. It’s always gorgeous.”

I saw more truth in his eyes and heard more in his voice than I ever had before. It was a beautiful afternoon and it would be a beautiful night.

“That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me. You *really* get me, don’t you?”

My doctor took a large red box from under his desk and put it on the desk in front of us.

“I feel like I do. And here, I have a present for you. This is called the Tiffany’s Lotus Lamp. This is in honor of your stunning serenity, of your grace.”

To my surprise, he pulled out of the red box a lamp with hundreds of pink and orange and green stained glass in the shape of leaves, gently placed together. I had never

seen a Tiffany's lamp in person before. It was a masterpiece and I felt rather like I was diving into a spectacular and cleansing ocean of truth and love.

But to return to Kristine's last dive, it was so amazing that no one thought about losing her, even as she almost noiselessly hit the lake. Her thin body flipped twice and was curved and beautiful the entire time. It was impossible to tell, but everyone assumed she was smiling even though she must have been concentrating more than she'd ever concentrated on anything in her entire life. It would have been difficult for anyone to argue that she didn't belong *right there* at that moment, hurtling to the surface as if she couldn't live otherwise. It made sense to her as a swimmer and diver that she would die in water at the end.

When she erupted from the lake, the eyes of all of her family members were still fixed on her like she hadn't yet touched the water. She smiled at their response as she swam to the bank and climbed up to stand beside them. Lilly ran forward first, crying like she'd been rescued from something worse than death, and hugged her great-grandmother's wet frame. Kristine laughed heavily, but she soon quieted down and sat down on the rocks beside Lilly, breathing hard.

"Mom!" Rachel yelled as she rushed to a coughing and wheezing Kristine. Lilly started crying and Jane came over to calm her down. Everyone knew what was going to happen, and they'd known it from the very beginning, but it was still coming as a shock.

Dr. Principe sat down next to his wife and then put her in his arms like an infant. It was only faintly, but he could see that his wife was smiling even as she gasped.

Ryan had been mostly angry and contemplative so far but he suddenly rushed to his grandmother and grandfather.

“Shouldn’t somebody call a doctor?”

“I am a doctor,” Dr. Principe said calmly. “This isn’t something you can make stop.”

“That’s bullshit!” Ryan screamed as he pulled out his phone. “I’m calling 911.”

“Her heart has just had too much. It’s been working hard for a long, long time and we’ve all felt it. She wouldn’t want to go to the hospital and I doubt they would take her anyway. She won’t last much longer, so just be with her.”

Ryan shoved his phone back into his pocket. Kristine’s breath slowed down and her head fell back on Dr. Principe’s arm. He gave her a kiss on the forehead as his children and great grandchildren let go of their sobs and held each other. They knew this was right.

The water below the cliff settled, still as if nothing had broken through it.

\*\*\*

### III

*And finally, the truth.*

And that’s how Kristine should have died, just three months before turning one-hundred and nine. That’s how I would like to die someday, and even though Kristine probably wouldn’t have appreciated it, most of us would love a death with so much



pulsing life. Dr. Principe believed that one day, we could get there, and I only wish I could die so magically beside him.

But unfortunately that isn't really how it happened, and Kristine was a little less heroic than that. In this last section, I'll finally talk about how she *really* died. Remember, this will be a story, but I'll try to be as truthful as I can, based on what I know personally and from interviews with his daughter before she refused to talk to me, but I had to make intelligent guesses on some parts. The true story isn't futuristic like the CAOST nightmare and it's not heartwarming like the diving fantasy. In fact, it's gritty and very real.

In reality, no one expected Kristine to live forever, and she certainly didn't. The true story needs to be told. Let's take a look at what really happened and let this be your final take home. You might have had trouble believing me at some points, so I'll make a confession. Dr. Principe and I were more than just student and teacher. We loved one another, and often I considered us one. Rachel, the Principes' daughter, helped me for the remainder of the story before she realized the extent of my relationship with her father, but I am the best person to tell this story.

Kristine was getting very sick. She thought her skin was suddenly starting to look yellow in certain types of light, and she'd drunk more water lately than a desert refugee. She was worried, but not that worried. It was probably her diabetes, and she'd dealt with that for several years.

She and her doctor blamed her job for the diabetes. No matter how much Kristine loved it and no matter how much of her life she poured into it, being a lawyer had been a stressful occupation, and her level of commitment to her job shared an inverse

relationship with her concern towards her activity level and her psychological health. It was a shame the shape she let herself get into, significantly obese and apple-shaped., whereas she had once been a trim and well-toned college athlete.

“No matter what you think you look like,” Dr. Principe told me he used to say to her when she had been upset about her doctor’s recommendation to lose weight, several years before she had to quit work. “When we’re together, I still think of the sexy little swimmer that I met in college.”

He said kind things like this a lot.

“Well I don’t feel like that anymore, and I guess I wouldn’t have diabetes if I did.”

I would have thought she would have taken this conversation as a hint. In the end, Dr. Principe was a brilliant, hard-working man who needed confident companionship, a woman who was not in need of liposuction or triple bypass surgery.

“You can’t get torn up about this. As a *doctor*, I can tell you that if you can be happy, don’t worry about what your doctor tells you.”

He shouldn’t have had to deal with that, but he was too good of a husband to leave Kristine alone. He turned to me to deal with his predicament and I relished the time with him.

“But I feel like a *huge* nothing,” Kristine said, grabbing some of her belly fat. “I need to do something about all this blubber.”

“Well, we can walk if you want to,” Dr. Principe said, as if she were being irrational. “And if you want to swim, I’ll go get you a membership at the Y. I can’t promise that I’ll get in the pool, but—”

“I haven’t been in the pool for a very long time, Dick. Let’s not even pretend that’s going to happen.”

Exercising, even walking, was too difficult for Kristine, and it got worse with each passing year and every added pound. By the time she took off from her job, she couldn’t walk for long, and she didn’t want to because she was tired. It wasn’t long before she stopped thinking about practicing law again.

Dr. Principe had been able to take care of her and keep the bills paid for a few years after she’d left her practice. If you remember, he had a good job at a prestigious university where he showed experimentally the role of inflammation in many aspects of human health. His ideas about the role of inflammation in pathology weren’t so unique, but he showed in several studies that the body’s physical response to psychological stress is comparable, and in fact identical in some cases, to the response to physical, life-threatening stress. If you’re wondering, I met the Doctor during the first day of Psychology 457: Well-being for the Lifetime. That’s where he showed me his genius and I fell in love with him.

“Do any of you have a recent cut?” Dr. Principe asked on that first day of class at the head of a packed room. I already knew he was magnificent. I raised my hand immediately.

“Good, hold it up and show everyone, and take off that band-aid,” he said. I timidly raised my right arm and took off my band-aid to reveal a huge scab at my elbow. “That’s disgusting! How did you do that?”

My heart was fluttering but I didn’t care about the other students. It was all about Dr. Principe

“I, I swim and I dive. I hit it on the pool deck last week during practice. It was stupid.”

He came over to my desk and gently lifted my arm. My heart fluttered more.

“Oh. You look like a swimmer. I should have known! But do you see this disgusting scab everyone? All that festering inflammation on such beautiful skin?” Dr. Principe said as students laughed at my exposed wound. “Well, I can promise you, most of you have that going on *inside of you* right now.”

There was a general confusion obvious in the room.

“Your body doesn’t really know the difference between a tiger about to attack and a chick or dude you’re hot for telling you to go screw yourself” This was part of his regular speech. He knew how to keep me interested from the very beginning. “All your brain gets is the relay of troubling information and it’s just as bad as getting beaten up or getting the flu or something else that’s critical or pathologic.”

“I don’t buy that,” said an arrogant boy in the front row. “Getting sick doesn’t happen because of *information*. There are pathogens and there’s epidemiology that can tell us—”

“No, you’re focusing on the wrong bull’s eye. Yes, pathogens can get you sick, but there are pathogens flying and floating and running around you all the time. These days, it’s about keeping your immune system from catching everything that it’s getting pummeled with. That means lots of the vitamins you need and plenty of fun exercise, but it also means keeping your head on straight and happy.”

“But it’s hard to believe that what you *think* has anything to do with it,” the boy in the front row said. “I guess if you *know* how to keep from getting sick, that could help,

but if getting sick were all about what you thought, about *information*, then you could keep from getting sick by, by being in a good mood, or only learning *happy* information.”

“That’s not too far from the truth, actually. The problem these days is that most information you come in contact with seems to be freaking you out or pissing you off.”

“Well, I’ll agree with that,” the boy said as others giggled.

“Now don’t—don’t get me wrong,” Dr. Principe said. “Of course getting sick isn’t all about information. Don’t think that. What I’m talking about is constant, lingering stress that’s got your bodies smoldering for years. And *that* does make you sick eventually.”

“So you’re saying that people are healthier if they’re happier?” I asked. What a beautiful concept.

“What I’m saying is that people just can’t stop worrying and it’s killing them.”

After class, the professor stopped me and asked me to go have a chat with him in his office. It was something we did twice a week after class, and in a few weeks, I was even going to his house nights to talk even longer. He liked to talk about swimming at first, and then about everything. When Kristine worked more than business schedule, I even went during the weekend afternoons.

There was always a lot to talk about. Like I’ve said before, Dr. Principe had been one of the strongest voices to shout that even mild chronic stress can be a significant detriment to more than just psychological health. He prided himself on avoiding worry. He knew what to eat, what not to eat, how to act even. He’d failed to disprove a lot of that himself. But he had poor heart health in his genes and he didn’t believe in restrictive diets. That wasn’t his style—he said they killed the spirit faster than anything.

“Kristine keeps bitching that if I don’t cut back on red meat and fat, that I’m going to be sorry,” Dr. Principe said as he ordered a T-Bone at dinner the day of his first cardiologist appointment. Kristine was at work late—it wouldn’t be long before she quit but she was giving it her all until the end. My doctor often took me out to the best restaurants when she was working too late. This one was 4-star. “Well guess what? I already had steak four nights this week and I’m not getting chicken tonight.”

His wife was always a thorn in his side. It was unfortunate, but I always tried to help.

“She’s always bugging you. I don’t think her health can be that great! She worries all the time.”

“She’s been like that for years. I used to try and get her to go on trips all over the world. France, Canada, Austria, everywhere, but she was always busy worrying about work.”

“I would go with you anywhere, Doctor Principe. You don’t need a worrier like her on your back anywhere, let alone some of the most beautiful places in the world.”

“Damn right. I told her, *I have done nothing but study the human body my entire career and one of the most important things I’ve learned, and I’ve told you this over and over, Kristine, is that if you worry all the time about food, about anything, it’s pretty damn bad on your heart.* But she still nags.”

Not long after Kristine quit work, Dr. Principe, the best man I ever knew, died from a heart attack. I can’t help but blame it on his nagging wife.

“I love you, Dick, very much,” I said to my Doctor in his living room as I waited for the ambulance to come take him away. “Just relax.”

“I’ll get through this and leave her and I’ll be all yours,” Dr. Principe said from the floor. “I’ll make sure Kristine is set for the rest of her life, but I’m leaving her. I promise.”

He was a wonderful man who thought of others in his last moments. He couldn’t follow through on his promises for the first time. He had invested a lot of money into research to promote better health through psychological wellness. But drug companies and many other doctors were resistant. The research was mostly marginalized without any return on investment and Kristine hadn’t realized just how much Dr. Principe had believed in his work until he had passed away, leaving hardly enough to bury him. He didn’t deserve it, and I won’t write much about it because it gets me unable to do anything, let alone write. But I have no problem talking about the later death of his wife.

Kristine started working at the hospital as a receptionist after her husband died because it was the only job she could find, and her daughter Rachel had enough trouble keeping her own family fed on a social worker’s income to worry with her mother. It wasn’t law, but it was a paycheck and it didn’t require much moving. Rachel blamed her mother’s money problems on me after I interviewed her and she found out about some of the gifts he had given me, like the pink Tiffany’s Lotus Lamp. But Kristine’s problems were not my fault. She was never the type to independently raise herself out of her problems. Dr. Principe had always done that for her, and he was gone.

Kristine’s health didn’t get better and it finally progressed to a crisis. Rachel came to visit her one afternoon while her kids were still at the babysitter, and she found her weak and disoriented. She immediately drove her to the ER and she got worse the entire trip. Rachel was very worried, especially since she didn’t know how they were going to

pay for the visit. Kristine was a few months away from receiving Medicare, and she hadn't been able to pay for her insurance for a few years. When she was diagnosed with diabetes, her insurance company had dropped her coverage and the only plans that would take her were much too expensive for a hospital receptionist.

“My health isn't valuable enough to insure,” Kristine had said with a grin when Rachel had bothered her about getting coverage. “I'd rather spend my dimes on boxed wine.”

But Rachel forgot all that as they wheeled her mother into the emergency room, now unconscious and breathing very hard. She followed the team all the way to OR 2, but the surgeon, a short balding man, stopped her in the hallway and shut the door behind him. Rachel waited, almost forgetting what her mother looked like as they took her in.

After around twenty minutes of thoughtless listening to the beeping, clinking sounds of the operating room slipping under the door, Rachel looked up hopefully as the door to the operating room opened. A few people stepped out, looking as though they were in a hurry.

“Oh, hello,” said the balding surgeon, surprised to find her in the hallway. Everyone else had ignored her. “I'm Dr. Madigan and I've been working with, I'm guessing your mother?”

“Yes, her name's Kristine. How is she?”

“Your mother is very low on blood. We tried to stop it but it's not working and she's just bleeding—”

“How the hell did that happen?”



“Both of your mother’s kidneys are failing. That can happen after years with diabetes--”

“You people keep blaming everything on diabetes! For Christ’s sake, she’s bleeding!”

“It can wreak havoc on your whole body. Your mother was also having some circulation and coagulation issues and it made the bleeding worse for her.”

“Stop talking about her like she *was*. Now what are you talking about? Why is she losing blood?”

“First she rejected the catheter for the dialysis. We think it was a leak of heparin into the catheter apparatus and it caused a lot of heavy bleeding and put her immune system into overdrive. When we tried to give her an O negative blood transfer, she rejected--”

“Stop! You’re losing me. Simplify.”

“She’s bleeding non-stop,” Dr. Madigan said. “Even if we could give her a matched blood transfusion, she’s going to need immediate dialysis, for I don’t even know how long. And we already tried to put the catheter in and I told you what happened.”

“Well, it’s not over. Keep trying.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t. I have a boss and I can’t do it anymore. We have regulations. Your mother is too far along and we’ve tried everything. You should spend her last few minutes in peace with her.”

“That’s bullshit! It’s because we can’t pay isn’t it?”

“We don’t have enough doctors on the floor. We hardly have enough nurses. And we definitely don’t have enough equipment. We can’t keep putting resources into your mother when we have babies who are dying from things we can fix.”

“So you’re saying you can’t help her?”

“I don’t think anything we could do would keep your mother living for long with any quality of life. There is next to no money left in this hospital because no one has insurance and we’ve had to make some really hard decisions.”

“Okay. So you mean decisions to let patients die?”

“We have a mission statement here that demands that doctors and other staff try our hardest to allow every person to live out their fullest potential,” Dr. Madigan said.

“That means that if it’s between helping an aged person live with a poor quality of life for a few years and helping a child or young adult live a full life and accomplish new goals, we have to help the younger person first.”

“But you can’t just stop! Help her! She’s got more to accomplish!”

Dr. Madigan rolled up his sleeves and sighed.

“Go into the waiting room and I’ll do what I can. But be prepared.”

“Please do everything!”

Rachel walked out of OR hallway as Dr. Madigan shut the door to OR 2. Of course she was hopeful, she was always hopeful. It had been helpful in the last several months as her mother became more and more depressed about her condition.

“I cry some days, all day,” she’d told Rachel one morning, not long after her doctor told her that she should take some time off work. “I can’t do anything but sit here and eat.”

“Mom, you’re sick. You need to rest.”

“I’ve been sick for months now! I need to go to the office is what I need.”

“You can’t. Just, here—eat this,” Rachel said, handing her mother a bagel and cheese wrapped in yellow paper. “You’re probably starving.”

“What I’m starving for,” she said as she grabbed the bagel from her daughter, “is paperwork. Yes, Christ, *paperwork*. I miss reading tangles of contracts and figuring out what it can and can’t mean. I miss divorce settlements and all that paperwork!”

“When you go back, you’ll be sick of all that paperwork soon enough.”

“Yes, *if* I go back. Right now, I don’t even know if I can keep going to work at the hospital.”

“Stop being so pessimistic! What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m miserable, that’s what is *wrong* with me. Or that’s one of the things, anyway.”

“Mom, why are you miserable? Is this about dad?”

“I miss him everyday. But I wish this were just about your dad.”

“Well then what is it then? Can I help you?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m a lawyer with a secretarial job and I’ll probably never go back to law. My grandchildren are afraid of me because they think I’m a fat grumpy old woman, and I am! I can barely walk to my mailbox once every other day. I’ve wasted the last fifteen years of my life.”

Her mother would be fine. She’d been down for so long, but Rachel was going to help her get back to her old feisty self. Starting as soon as she walked out of hospital, Rachel was going to make sure that Kristine laughed every day, make sure that she

started walking and eventually even swimming again. She would feel 20 years younger, and her diabetes would evaporate faster than dew on a miserably hot summer day.

It had been close to half an hour. Rachel got up from her seat in the waiting room and headed to the operating room where she'd left her mother. She didn't care if someone had a problem with it, and no one stopped her, even as she reached the closed door to OR 2. When she put her ear to the door, she didn't hear anything—not doctors and nurses talking, not footsteps, not machines beeping, like when she had left the hallway. *They've moved into another room. There's no one in there!*

Rachel pushed the door open and realized she had been wrong; there was still one person in the room. Kristine lay on the operating table, all alone. Everything was silent and some of the lights had been turned down. Rachel recognized her by her bear slippers sticking out from underneath a white sheet that was soaked through with what must have been fresh blood. Rachel ran to her mother in horror, and was slightly relieved to find her breathing.

“Mom? Mom, are you awake?” she asked, and then more quietly as Kristine failed to answer, “Mommy?”

Kristine was mumbling and moaning a bit. She obviously wasn't trying to say anything. Rachel looked at her and thought of how glad she was that her mother was unconscious. Her face was pale, but her arms were very yellow. There was blood all over her gown. Some of it had started to dry around the edges, but more was gushing out.

“Mom, I'm going to get the doctors,” Rachel said and held her mother's hand under the bloody white sheet. “They can't do this! Just stay for me.”

Kristine obviously wasn't conscious and she had stopped making garbled noises. A drop of blood fell from the white sheet and landed on the marble floor by Rachel's shoe.

That's the way Kristine really died, not too long ago.

That all felt good, but it won't bring him back. I hope you've learned something.