

Stuck- by Trish Lowe.

The cacophony of sound piercing the breaking dawn, revealed itself to be the newest in a series of increasingly offensive releases by Detroit born rapper, Eminem. Cursing quietly and reminding herself to change stations, Meg silenced the radio with the over arm speed an international cricket team would pay vast sums to develop and began reciting a list of reasons not to get out of bed.

It seemed like only seconds ago, that Lilly, her feverish three year old, had succumbed; her serene features now bearing no resemblance to the hysterical contortions inflicted upon the household a mere two hours before. Consequently, Meg berated herself for agreeing to take on this, her second extra shift of the week. Thankfully, her husband Patrick, who lay blissfully asleep beside her- oblivious to all which had transpired overnight- was working from home today, and therefore able to care for their little patient.

Meg responded to a surge of adrenaline, renewed commitment to her colleagues and bank balance as she leaped out of bed and headed for the shower, reasoning that once upright, she would have no capacity to reconsider. With Lilly now sleeping peacefully, Meg allowed the fortifying hot water to stream down in a scorching cascade, as she reflected on her journey to date.

Apart from one brief, passing phase, when as a nine year old she had imagined herself spending life as a nun, Meg had relentlessly pursued a nursing career. As many members of her matriculating class had opted to settle in their rural hometown, marry their childhood sweethearts, work the land or take up a trade, she had been one of a few, to scour university handbooks, interview for student nursing positions and make plans to "move away". Throughout, she had been encouraged by many, to reconsider. Her boyfriend at the time, had brushed away rare tears, as the realisation had dawned, that in leaving town, she was actually, leaving him.

Meg's intention had been viewed by her father, himself a chivalrous and hardworking man, as being one of the few noble, and therefore acceptable reasons, for his fresh faced 17 year old to leave the sun scorched wheat farm of her youth, though his bewilderment had remained apparent, with every head scratch, hat adjustment and conversation on the matter.

As her departure date had approached and trepidation taken hold, Meg had sat on the bank of the Namoi River and allowed the stunning, saffron and blood red sunsets, to bury beneath her teenage insouciance, and force from her, the possibility of returning, qualified and starched veil in hand, if life in the city did not meet her expectations. Meg had then packed rapidly, boarded the Country Link Express and travelled 500km, with her mother knitting nervously by her side.

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Now decades later, with a marriage and post graduate study under her belt, one beautiful three year old daughter and another due in five months, Meg still took great pride in donning her uniform, affixing her badges and preparing for each day.

Mercifully relieved of morning sickness, she gobbled down her vegemite toast, while taking in the morning headlines. Meg invested forty seconds, wondering how she could turn a Tupperware container of salmon salad into a viable lunch option for the fourth day in a row, before deciding it was impossible, as she tossed two bananas into her newly acquired backpack, and headed for the car.

So engrossed was she in the playful banter provided by the radio DJs who entertained her each morning, that with no memory of her journey, she entered Darlinghurst Road. Ironically, the gritty home of organised crime, brothels and illegal gambling, also bordered some of Sydney's most prestigious suburbs. Schoolgirls, in their straw hats walked efficiently in double file towards the security of their elite private schools, while across the road, heroine addled prostitutes trawled for game among oblivious commuters, hustling towards the subway.

Meg soon emerged onto the tranquil, tree lined avenue, which housed her current workplace. She pulled into the subterranean car park, taking note of the increased number of homeless men, seeking refuge there. Alighting over dead pigeons and discarded *McDonald's* wrappers, she stepped into an unidentifiable puddle of brackish water and engine oil. Recoiling in horror, she hastened out, as she was now very close to being uncharacteristically late.

Even blindfolded, Meg would be able to identify a hospital, simply by the smell. The familiar odours of humanity, disinfectant, anaesthetic gas and breakfast being prepared in the ground floor kitchen, greeted her as she entered the foyer. Pump alarms chirped and patient call bells rang out. Monitoring equipment stood at attention, as though sentinels standing guard over the elderly and infirm. The night staff wandered past, dead eyed and robotic, leaning heavily against the handrails, as they balanced bed notes on their stomachs and entered their final observations for the night.

After tossing her backpack into the staff tearoom, Meg made herself a comforting cup of *English Breakfast* and prepared for handover- the perfunctory baton change, as one team's day began and another's ended. Fatigue overtook her as she settled into the warm embrace of the filthy corduroy couch, now covered in the detritus of communal life, lolly wrappers and biscuit crumbs. She wondered if it possible to be this tired. What she would give, to curl up and go back to sleep!

Meg was delighted to receive essentially the same patient allocation she had taken the day before, which ensured that familiarity existed, trust had been established and daily

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routines were known. However, two new admissions expanded her allocation and so having read through the admitting physician's notes and instructions, Meg proceeded in, to introduce herself.

There was something incredibly uplifting about the bonhomie that four men, together in a room, generated. This particular morning was no exception, as the scent of ex-servicemen, Tony and Richard's freshly washed bodies and aftershave, met her at the door. They had not seen each other since serving in the Third RAAF squadron, based in Nui Dat-Vietnam, fifty years prior. Their reunion had been overwhelming and unexpected, as they reacquainted during their rehabilitation for injuries, doubtlessly originating from their time in active service. They had discovered to their astonishment, that the past decades had been spent raising their families, less than two suburbs apart!

'Here she is!' welcomed Tony.

'Good morning love, did you sleep here?' Richard enquired, referring to her late departure, the previous evening. 'I was just about to ring. You need to check on, old mate', he instructed, as he nodded towards the far bed, from which Arthur- 87 years old, febrile, near nude and floridly delirious- was busily escaping.

'Good morning gents, how are you?' Meg exclaimed, as she hastily pulled the curtain, attended to Arthur, comforted him, and settled him back to bed. Meg hoped that the medical review promised for Arthur's sepsis related delirium, occurred promptly.

Meg's fourth patient stared disinterestedly through the window. Michael was a quiet man, with a complex social history. Once a ward of the state and sexually abused as a young runaway, he had engaged in intravenous drug use, before being convicted of armed robbery and interned for 15 years in Sydney's Long Bay jail. Once out, Michael had lived rough, relying on support provided by the Salvation Army Crisis Team, who regularly patrolled the city street and parklands, to survive.

Now Hepatitis C positive, Michael was without question, the most jaundiced person, Meg had ever seen. His eyes, yellow orbs, glowing from within his emaciated face. The ascities associated with his condition, contributed to his enormous girth and the excessive bile salts which circulated freely around his damaged body, tortured him. Michael was racked by fever, fatigue and muscle aches. He found eating and drinking difficult, due to his cracked lips, sore throat, and persistent mouth ulcers- all symptoms of this acute exacerbation, of his chronic illness.

'Good morning Michael-how are you feeling this morning?' Meg asked.

'Sis, I'm so bloody itchy', he replied, through broken teeth.

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'I am so sorry to hear that', Meg replied, as she placed her hand on his shoulder, and attempted unsuccessfully, to make eye contact. 'I will help you take a shower after your breakfast, but first, I would like to examine you and give you your *Clexane* injection. Is that ok?' she asked.

Michael consented with a resigned nod- his time spent in institutions doing more for his understanding of the system, than his social graces.

As Meg commenced her examination, she took note of the many nursing problems, for which she would need to find solutions. Meg administered the injection prescribed to support Michael's ailing liver function and impaired clotting ability. He didn't flinch as she pushed the small dose, into his taut, yellow thigh.

As she withdrew the needle, Meg was distracted from her task, by a catastrophic noise emanating from the bed next door, which no doubt indicated that Arthur was on the move, once again.

It only took the split second of Meg's divided attention, to imbed the used needle, up to the hub, into the flesh of her gloved thumb. Dumbfounded, Meg stared at the offending item, as it protruded obscurely, at a right angle. Meg managed to retain the string of profanity, which coursed through, choosing instead an inappropriate, 'Oops!', before removing the needle and placing it safely in its intended, point of use receptacle. Michael's concern registered plainly, as Meg excused herself from his bedside.

As expected, Arthur was almost out of bed, his bedside table upturned on the floor. With urinary catheter in hand, Arthur had successfully freed himself from the restrictions imposed by an intravenous infusion, as the cannula now swung against his cot side, fluid coursed onto the sheet and blood cascaded down his tiny arm. Meg managed an adequate hand wash, before settling Arthur once again, simultaneously stemming the bleeding and shutting off his IV infusion.

By now, almost an hour had passed.

It was only when Meg was approached by Amy, her Nurse Unit Manager, on an unrelated staffing matter, that she was able take comfort in her friend's counsel, and reveal that she had sustained a needle stick injury, from a known HCV source. Amy immediately gave her friend an encouraging hug, and assured her that her patient load would be covered, whilst she sought advice from Heather, the hospital's Clinical Nurse Consultant, responsible for supervising all staff, and their occupational exposure to infectious diseases.

Meg, felt disembodied throughout the consultation. Despite, Heather's encyclopaedic knowledge of exposure related risk, all Meg heard through white noise was- 'baseline bloods'... 'seroconversion'.... 'three month wait'.... 'risk of transmission to you

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approximately 3%'....'genotype, no post exposure prophylaxis.....'. In summary, the risk was low but not inconsequential and there was nothing that could be done, except wait to see if this potentially life limiting virus, took up residence in Meg's body. This exposure gave rise to significant health consequences, not only for herself, but importantly, for her unborn baby.

Heather instructed Meg to go home, as she was by now so clearly bewildered, that effective functioning was impossible. Meg gathered her things, weaved her way back to the car, and drove home in a daze of recrimination, wishing she could turn back the clock, and dreading the interminable wait for clarity.

As Meg entered the kitchen, her unexpected arrival generated such excitement, that it took several seconds for Patrick to register the tears rolling down her face.

Meg did her best to recount the information Heather had provided, before resorting to her favoured thinking position. She opened the fridge door and stared blankly inside, as if by some miracle, the answer to her concerns might reside somewhere between last night's leftovers and the margarine container. In settling for a glass of iced water, Meg knocked the water jug from its shelf- the shattered glass, providing a powerful metaphor for Meg's fragile state of mind.

The fatigue which had threatened to overtake her all morning, finally took hold, as Meg assumed a foetal position on the floor. Symbolically, she wrapped her frame around her developing baby, knowing well, there was nothing she could do to change the course of events now. Meg indulged in a rare torrent of self pity as she sobbed quietly, surrounded by glass shards. It was some time before Patrick discovered her lying there, exhausted and in a state of suspended animation, accepting that all she could do was wait.

Until then, they were undeniably... stuck.

Meg became aware of tinkling, as Patrick disposed of the broken glass, followed by an exaggerated stage whisper- 'Wake up Mummy!'

Meg snapped to attention, turning her head to come face to flesh with her daughter's dimpled kneecaps. Meg bolted upright and bundled her excited three year old- now standing resplendent in her favourite *Sesame Street* undies- onto her lap for a welcomed hug. Noticing Meg's tears, and with the pragmatism of a nurse's child, already worldly and well acquainted with the circle of life, Lilly asked, 'Did the sick people die Mummy?'

'No darling', Meg responded, 'nobody died today'.

With that proclamation, came perspective. *Nobody died today!* Notwithstanding Meg's uncertain future, she chastised herself for allowing a fear of the unknown to get the

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better of her. Yes, her morning had been rough, but panicking was not an option. She was, both a nurse and a country girl, raised to shake off life's knocks and prepare for the next.

'Are you feeling better darling?' Meg asked.

'Alllll better', Lilly confirmed, as she held arms expansively aloft. 'Daddy made me better'.

'Did he?' Meg responded. 'Clever Daddy! How did he do that?'

'Like this', she declared, authoritatively placing her hand on Meg's forehead-poking her eye in the process, 'and this', she added, smacking a kiss on the same spot. Meg laughed in spite of herself.

She would return to work tomorrow, resigned to letting the chips fall where they may. Right now, her priority sat in front of her, simultaneously providing an animated description of the tea party she and Daddy had enjoyed with "Hoppy"- her constant floppy eared companion- whilst sounding out the prospect of a picnic lunch.

'I have two bananas in my backpack', Meg offered, bursting with love and renewed gratitude. 'Let's share one.'

~~ The End~~