

PLAYING PATIENT

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I knew this would happen. The conference room is cold, and the doctor's handshake is colder. She looks at her clipboard, not me, but she has a horrible bedside manner, and she always will.

“You're still having tingling sensations and lack of feeling in your limbs occasionally,” she says like I need to be reminded. “Has that gotten worse in the mornings?”

“A little, maybe. I don't know,” I say with a shrug, wondering why I never remember to bring a cardigan to the hospital.

“According to the test results,” she says, not taking her gaze off the clipboard like her script is written there, “you have ALS.”

I peer at her, eyebrows raised. She thinks those three letters are supposed to mean something to me?

“Lou Gehrig’s Disease,” she says. “What Stephen Hawking has. That means you will slowly lose motor control. Probably over a matter of years. We can slow some of the progression with drugs but—”

“Then I end up in a fucking wheelchair and have a robot talking for me?”

I say.

She winces at the expletive. Finally, emotion.

“Well, not exactly,” she says.

“Yeah, not unless I have a shitload of money and can afford a wheelchair and a breathing machine and a robot that knows what I’m thinking,” I say. “So, I’ll just die.” I spit out the last word and start crying. I don’t feel her reach out to comfort me. She doesn’t offer tissues. I dig in my jeans pocket to find a couple that aren’t too balled up or torn or stuck together with snot.

She’s a real bitch. I’m not going to write that on her evals, but I’m pretty sure she doesn’t like me. That shouldn’t matter, however. You won’t love all your patients, but she could pretend. I’d like to tell her to go work in a lab with petri dishes and do something useful like discover a cure for cancer, because she’s even worse with giving that diagnosis. That was last week, or maybe the week before. I lose track of my alleged illnesses.

She's my first doctor of the day. Before my lunch break, I'll be told six more times that I have ALS. Those appointments will go better than this one. They usually do. The rest of the residents have a clue about what they're doing. They're only in their first year of residency, but I know who'll have a good bedside manner, a natural one, and who'll always feel a little strained. If they survive the program.

After our "appointment" she leaves the room and I fill out an evaluation on her performance. I don't understand why she hasn't improved over the past two and a half months of giving me diagnoses. We might have started out on a bad note, because the second time we met I came in complaining of a headache. She asked what I had done the night before, and I said I was out drinking with friends and took a few pills and well, you know.

She had this look in her eye that made it clear I wasn't what she would call a good person.

"You might rethink some of those choices," she said, glaring at me for being at the hospital with what she assumed were my self-imposed problems. But her job wasn't to give me a lecture, it was to make me feel better. Maybe she thought I wasn't making up the bit about the pills. I've never done something like that in real life, but even if I had, why should it matter?

I got back at her later, when I stormed into the ER as an irate and perhaps intoxicated family member who wanted to know what the hell they had done with my sister. She'd just come in for domestic abuse because that asshole beat her up again.

“Is he here?” I yelled, waving my arm around at the white walls. “If he comes within fifteen feet of me, he's a dead man.”

I swaggered past the resident to hug my “sister” who was sitting on the exam table. I cried on her shoulder and said she was coming home with me, then I threatened to hit the resident when she came close. My “sister” had to calm me down and tell me to have some coffee. I kept haranguing the resident even as I “sobered up,” telling her not to hurt my sister worse or I'd give her a real reason to hurt.

Okay, yes, I kind of have it in for her, but if she can't deal with fake-drunk me, how will she deal with people who mean it when they say this stuff? The one improv class I took while getting my journalism degree is coming in handy.

§

I work four or six-hour days, which is good since Mama wants me out of the house for that long. We have breakfast together, then she nods and

squeezes my hand to let me know she'll be fine with the medic alert button. I started the hospital job a little over a year ago, before her stroke. She's been home for three months and wants her privacy, to eat and pee and read in peace after two and a half months of hospitalization and in-patient rehab when peace was hard to come by.

Mama's right arm and leg are still paralyzed, and because of the aphasia, she can only say five words—I, I'll, wish, which, and one. At first, I was nervous to leave her at home and asked Mrs. Lehman next door if she could stay with Mama. She's elderly and chatty and slightly annoying after a period of time since she tells the same stories over and over. I couldn't think of anyone else who could come over and keep Mama company and call me if anything happened, so I figured this was a necessary inconvenience.

Mama disagreed.

After a week of Mrs. Lehman, Mama gave me a long look after she left for the day. She lifted her right arm and crossed with her left. Clearly the old lady had to go. I dropped my purse on the coffee table and eased down on the couch.

“But how will I know you're okay during the day?” I asked.

She dangled her medic alert button from her left hand and pointed to my cell phone which I'd taken out of my pocket.

“So you'll text on the hour or something?” I said.

Mama gave the thumbs-up sign. It was harder to explain the change to Mrs. Lehman, who wanted company more than Mama did. I had to think of good excuses.

“She needs to be on her own to concentrate,” I said. “She has writing she wants to do.”

“I could type for her?” said Mrs. Lehman with a hopeful smile.

I smiled back and shook my head. “She wants to do as much as she can on her own.”

I knew that much was true. Mama was pushing for as much independence as she could handle, and sometimes more. She was good at getting to the bathroom and transferring from her chair to the toilet, but she couldn't always get her pants up with her left hand. A couple times I came home to find her on the john, reading a book. She closed it, pointed to her pants, and I helped her pull them up.

“You're sure you don't want someone with you maybe one day a week?” I asked. She shook her head. Mama wanted to be on her own, a left-handed typist who was writing something she didn't want to show me. Every time I

saw Mrs. Lehman in the yard, she said to call her if we needed anything, anything at all. I told her we would and that it was very kind.

It was hard to go to work during Mama's first week alone. I worried she'd have another stroke or fall while doing a transfer to the toilet and not be able to press the medic alert button. I wondered how long I should wait for a text until I panicked.

But Mama was okay. Punctual. Vigilant. She had an egg timer beside her laptop at the kitchen table, and she reset it every hour and texted me a smiley face. I didn't know if she was smiling or not—this wasn't a smiley affair—but I could keep working as long as I felt the reassuring buzz in my pocket of my mother telling me not to panic.

§

“I wish,” she says while we eat dinner. “I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish.”

“Me, too,” I say.

“Which one,” she says.

She's going to speech therapy and occupational therapy twice a week. The speech therapist and I have her make other sounds, “ah” and “oh.” He says she is close to breaking through to other words, but she hasn't shattered the language window yet.

For dinner we have spoonable or forkable things that don't require cutting. Chili and macaroni. Noodle casserole. Stew. Stir-fry. I tell her about my day at work, the doctor-in-training who is still a bitch.

"If I really had ALS, I would have hit her," I say.

"Which one, which one, which one," says Mama, nodding.

Her voice rises and falls and speeds up when she's excited. I imagine conversations built on voice inflection, when "I wish" means "Good-bye," and "I love you," and "We're out of milk, can you get some at the store?"

There is an "I wish" that means, "When will you have a date with Mitchell again? You went to dinner, what, seven or eight times?"

"I don't know," I say. "He's nice, but I don't think it will work out."

"I wish," she says with a nod. I hope that means she understands. I stopped calling Mitch right after her stroke, when I was too frazzled to think about anything like romance. He was nice, said he understood, and we could cool things off for a bit, but even without the stroke I don't know if we would have lasted. He had an ex and kids, and that's the kind of potential drama I don't want to deal with unless I really, really, really like the guy.

Mama wishes I would have married the boyfriend I broke up with five years ago. We met in college and lived together for eight years, and I thought

a ring was implied. He kept saying someday, he needed to earn money for a down payment, and I was willing to believe him because we had student loans, but then I said okay, I'm thirty, not fooling around. Either I see a ring, or I move out. So, I moved out. Maybe that's okay. For the best. Because now I have Mama, who needs me whether she likes it or not. Most of the time I think she likes it. Or is willing to grit her teeth and admit I'm not an awful roommate.

§

I have coffee with Allen during our breaks at work. Today I have ALS again, and he has stage three colon cancer. We talk about the residents. Many of them make good bedside progress in a few weeks. Except for the one who's still a bitch. Allen agrees with me on this count.

"It's like she's become more resistant to change, rather than changing her approach," he says. "Maybe she's one of those people who gets more determined to do what she damn well pleases the more you tell her to do something else."

"I don't know why people go into medicine if they don't like other people," I say.

“It’s tough to give bad news,” Allen says with a shrug because he’s nicer than me.

“But do they think someone else will do all the crap jobs?” I say.

“Maybe,” says Allen. “I’m going to do my best to avoid giving the bad news. When you’re working in physical therapy, usually somebody already did it for you. Still, this is good training in how not to be an asshole.” Allen got a degree in economics, but now he wants to be a therapist. He’s taking all the science classes he missed before, two at a time, at the local community college.

I think he’ll be a good therapist—I’ve worked with a bunch of them lately, and he strikes me as a thoughtful and compassionate guy who will know just how much to push people. Since he’s going into a medical field, I understand why he wants to defend the young doctors, but the lack of tact still doesn’t make sense. If you don’t want to deal with living people, and the delicate task of trying to keep them alive, why not go into forensics? I think the bitchy resident needs counseling. Allen doesn’t disagree. He asks if I would like a coffee refill. I always say sure.

Allen is younger than me, twenty-seven, and decided last year that he wasn’t going to do graduate work in economics, which meant reshuffling his life and priorities to take a bunch more classes. My journalism degree might

be good for something if I decided to go back on the job market, but the newspapers are belt-tightening, everyone is an Internet editorialist, and I need to learn about digital and photojournalism to have a chance. It's easier to stay with Mama and say I'm pondering options.

Allen says it took a while for him to decide to go back to school because he didn't want anyone telling him what to read and he's on a tight budget, but with all the homework he doesn't have much time for going out. He also doesn't have a girlfriend but says there's a girl he likes at the pizza place where he has a second job.

“The boss's daughter, sadly,” he says. “Anyone who dates her would marry into the business, but I have other plans.”

He doesn't know he's eight years younger than me. Or at least he hasn't asked how old I am. I guess after a certain age you're not supposed to do that, especially with women. Is that how old he thinks I am, old enough not to ask? If I am old enough for him not to ask how old I am, does that mean I'm also old enough for him not to date? But he has his eyes on the pizza heiress, so I should avert my gaze. I'm really bad at doing that.

After I broke up with my eight-year boyfriend, I was a basket case. I didn't move back home, but I spent a lot of time there with Mama, watching movies and mourning. It had the emotional trappings of a divorce with none of the paperwork. Looking back, my ex and I were miraculously civil—I wanted the couch, he wanted the recliner chair; I liked the glass topped coffee table, he wanted the kitchen table; he had brought the bed into the relationship, and I didn't mind sleeping on the couch because I couldn't deal with the extra mattress space.

I was still working at the newspaper, putting too many miles on my car, writing local interest stories, and attending city council and school board and board of parks meetings. In the evenings, I didn't want to go home to the lonely two chairs at my card table, which was now my kitchen table, so I spent time with Mama who was also alone and had adapted better than me.

“Breakups happen,” she said, because she and my dad had been separated for twenty years. If there was any drama, I never saw it. He paid child support. I spent summers with him in Arizona. Then he died of a heart attack when he was sixty. Mama and I both missed him.

I didn't know if I missed my ex as much as I missed the dream that we would get married and get a house and a small dog and continue to build our

list of inside jokes. He'd always wanted to move west, so I wasn't surprised when, five months after we separated, I got the mass e-mail that he'd accepted a job in Seattle. I didn't e-mail back. After Mama had the stroke, I knew that if I'd stayed with him, we would have both moved, and I wouldn't have been here when she needed me to visit the hospital every day and move back home to rearrange the furniture and the rhythm of my days.

So yes. Maybe things work out in strange ways. Or things happen, and then we work them out in strange ways. Like coloring together after dinner. It's supposed to be therapeutic, relaxing, and help Mama work on her dexterity. We have colored pencils and twenty-odd coloring books I bought before she came home—interstellar space-scapes and sea life and city skylines and Edwardian fashions. Mama bites her lip to make sure she stays within the lines. By the time we have finished all of the pictures, I hope she will have more language. Just a smattering of words. I'm not picky. Expletives would be fine. But I'm nervous. The therapists have mentioned a sixth-month window to make improvements during her recovery process, and I worry about barriers in her mind, vocabulary blocks. It's not that her dictionary has been erased, but the wires that connect mind to mouth, teeth, and tongue have been tangled.

The other problems are things I didn't expect, like when she points to her pill box and I know she's already taken her meds for the night. I wonder if she has forgotten, or if she's in pain, or if I'm the one who's getting mixed up because today is colliding with yesterday.

Other times she wants to play the piano at three in the morning and I'm tired and pull a pillow over my head. Or she wants to sit at her laptop and write and not have dinner, though I'm starving.

"I need to eat something," I say, so she knows I'm not being impolite.

"I wish," she says, glancing up from the screen like she's telling me to go ahead and eat already. Mama will not show me what she's writing. When I edge around to look, she leans forward to cover the screen from view. I worry there are words she cannot say and doesn't want me to read. I worry it's a line of text I wouldn't be able to understand, but she can decode.

§

Allen and I are married, I'm pregnant, and after the amniocentesis, the bitch says something might be wrong with the baby.

"We're not sure," she says, looking down at the clipboard that I have decided doubles as her shield, protecting her from patients and combative words.

"We'll need to do more tests."

Allen and I have decided to trade off who breaks down in tears and who does the comforting and screaming at the doctor. This was Allen's idea, and I like it because he didn't assume that I should be the one to cry every time just because I was theoretically pregnant. Because the bitch already hates me, he weeps, and I do the screaming.

"We've had enough fucking tests," I yell as Allen shudders against me and my flat stomach. "Why can't you give us a straight answer and tell us what's wrong so we can have a healthy kid?"

"Of course, you'll have a healthy child," says the bitch, looking as emotional and comforting as a tax accountant. "Maybe I should give you a moment to digest this."

She skirts out of the room before I can tell her to shut up and sit down because we have more questions.

Allen sits up after the door closes.

"Was I too over the top?" he asks.

"You were great," I say. "We should keep these roles." Not that I have an ulterior motive of getting to hug and comfort him while venting.

"Well," he says, "it's my kid, too. What if I gave her screwed-up sperm? I'd blame myself in real life. When my sister was pregnant two years ago, she

almost delivered prematurely. They stopped the birth, but she had to be off her feet for a month. She felt bad for weeks after that, wondering what she'd done wrong. I didn't think it was her fault, but I spent a lot of time with her on the phone telling her that. It was really emotional. She was scared and frustrated, so I'm kind of channeling that, you know?"

I nod. I know. We spend the rest of the morning shuddering and hugging and screaming at doctors and while it's not the same as if we were in a real relationship, there's a deeper camaraderie than just friendship. I can't quite explain it, but at the end of the morning I feel slightly nauseated like I imagine women do when they have morning sickness. Allen and I high five after our last performance, then fill out the evaluations.

"We should audition for soap operas," he says. "We have this down pat." Over the past few months, we've received enough bad news for at least four seasons of drama—we're always terminal, or we have to take a long list of drugs with awful side effects, or our drugged-out brother got beat up in a bar and needed stitches, or our grandma had a catastrophic heart attack and is on life support, or our cousin took too many pills, or they're very sorry, the dog didn't make it, they don't know about our sister yet.

Allen gives me a hug before we go home, then lets go and holds me at arm's length. "Your shoulders are tense," he says. "Want to come to a yoga class with me? I have bad form and can't breathe at the right times, but it's helping me to relax a little and de-stress. I get two free guest passes a year. I won't guilt you to go back if you don't like it."

I thank him for the offer and say I have plans, but maybe another time.

"Sounds good," Allen says, giving me another hug. He has three hours before work at the pizza parlor, and I have to see how Mama is doing on her novel or autobiography or trying to transcribe the dictionary in her head. Maybe it's good that I have this job because my real life is much less dramatic in comparison. At least usually.

When I get home, Mama has the grocery list in hand and waves at the door. She wants to go to the store. Sometimes we don't need much, just an excuse to get out of the house. I don't mind helping her out to the car—we have the transfer from the chair down pat—and I explain Allen on our drive, trying to keep her expectations low.

"I might ask my co-worker out for coffee," I say.

"I wish," she says, turning toward me.

“His name is Allen,” I say. “He's nice. Smart and funny. If it goes well, I don't know, I could bring him by the house sometime. But he's just a friend. He probably thinks I'm an old woman.”

“Which one,” Mama says, changing the radio station.

Mama doesn't sing or hum anymore. I miss our goofy times together, when one of us would say something that reminded the other person of a song, and we'd start belting it out. At least half of the first verse. I let Mama control the radio. It's like a science experiment to see where she stops, whether she nods her head in time to the beat or taps her fingers and smiles like she remembers the lyrics.

I don't want to think her mouth has given up on words, but I'm trying to allow for the possibility. I tell myself we can have conversations based on wishes, but there are many things we do now because we don't have a choice. We're creative. We're proud of ourselves. We're moving on. But the option is to curl in a corner and pout. I know people do that, but it doesn't seem like much fun.

“You're both doing so well,” people say when they see Mama and me in the grocery store, me pushing the cart and her toeing along in her wheelchair.

“You're so brave.”

“I wish,” Mama says.

Like hell we're brave, I want to say, but don't. I smile and thank them because that is the polite thing. This is not brave. This is what we have to do. End of story.

We're figuring out ways to talk with each other. Or she's teaching me how to talk with her. We have a system of thumbs up and thumbs down, which works for her to give her opinion on a lot of things, but we still get frustrated at the limitations. Usually that's at night, but during those hours people are less themselves. Or they are more stressed and irritable versions of themselves who should be asleep, not trying to have a conversation.

Tonight, Mama is restless, rambunctious, toeing around the living room. She gets her plastic bag of pill bottles from the kitchen table and shakes them at me like maracas.

“You already had your pills,” I say.

“Which one, which one, which one,” Mama says, tilting her head at me like that is obvious, but there is still a problem.

“Do you hurt?” I say. “What's wrong?”

“Which one, which one,” Mama says, rolling back to the kitchen table because obviously I am useless. This is when I get worried. What if communication between us never really works again? What if we just can't talk?

§

I don't tell Allen about this the next day when we have lunch in the cafeteria. They give us meal vouchers when we have morning and afternoon shifts. Allen tells me about last night at the pizzeria, when they had more stupid customers than usual.

“People call to order a pizza, then when I ask what they'd like on it, they tell me to wait a moment and put their hand over the receiver and ask what everyone wants. This happens all the time. I stand there thinking I could be studying for my chem test, and instead I'm waiting to see if this guy wants mushrooms or pepperoni.” He smiles. “I guess I'm ready for a different job and different frustrations. There's always going to be something, but I'd rather have new shit than the same old shit.”

I nod. It's good to remember that normal conversation can be tricky, and people often require a measure of patience even if you can understand what they're saying. Communication is a precarious art form.

“I have a date tonight,” he says. “I finally decided to ask her out.”

“Wow,” I say because I can't think of anything else.

He grins. “We'll see what happens.”

“Yeah.” I'd like to say *But I'm having your baby, asshole*, but I'm not, so I don't. I've heard this happens when people are acting in plays and movies and transfer their emotional investment from one sphere to another. Sometimes it works out, and sometimes it's a train wreck. So much of our relationship is based on acting, people who are not our real selves. At the pizza parlor they have real conversations during work and breaks. Allen knows her better than he knows me. She knows him better than I do. Probably. I take a large bite of my grilled cheese sandwich and keep smiling.

I can't call this my heart breaking because that would be stupid and melodramatic. Maybe I wouldn't like him, the real him, if we revealed more of our lives and had conversations that weren't focused on thwarting the bitchy resident. But Allen works a lot in the evening, and I have Mama, so I never thought about asking him for a drink.

That night I tell Mama we should go out to eat. She smiles. I help her get into the car. I heft her wheelchair into the trunk. We look for a handicapped parking space near the restaurant. I look for evil steps to avoid. The way I see the world has shifted since I'm thinking about wheelchairs all the time. I've

started looking for curb cuts, notice a landscape composed of cracks and steps and uneven surfaces. Where did they come from and why did I never see them before? Everything has changed. I feel like we're too young for this to be happening, though I know that is not the case.

Restaurants can be a challenge because people talk to Mama loudly and slowly, like she's hard of hearing or a disobedient child. Mama can read the menu well enough and point to what she wants, but even after the server takes my order, she asks what my friend wants to eat. I glare.

"She's not deaf," I say. "She has a brain. You can ask her questions."

Mama nods and gives her half smile and points to the French dip, what she usually orders at restaurants, then she hands the menu to the server who has the grace to blush.

"Which one," says Mama and pats my hand. She's telling me not to be so hard on them. *It's okay, they don't understand how much I understand.* But I want to be mad anyway. I think she realizes that something else is wrong.

"I wish?" she says, tilting her head at me.

I shake my head, not wanting to answer the question I know she is asking. I'm an idiot for having stupid crushes.

"I need a real job," I say. "Maybe I should pick up freelance work."

I stopped applying for journalism jobs after Mama had the stroke. I couldn't concentrate on applications and knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate on writing. The hospital job proved useful in more ways than one, since I could go to work and vent at doctors at the same time. It's a good-for-now job, not a forever job. It doesn't pay enough for that.

"I could probably find an online writing gig," I say. "Have to pick back up somewhere."

"I wish," says Mama. Maybe she believes this is my real exasperation, or maybe she knows this is about the guy at work. Back home I ask if she wants to watch a movie. She gives me the thumbs-up and rolls to the couch. I make popcorn even though I'm full. I want something to pick at, an activity so I don't cry. On the couch I curl into her because I need to be close to someone. She rests her left arm around me and gives my shoulder a squeeze.

§

The next day Allen is quiet when we have coffee. I don't know if he's tired or if the date didn't go well or he didn't get as high a score as he would have liked on the last chem test—who knows how much I know about his life—but I have Mama on my mind. I've told Allen a little about her, but today I fill in more details. Maybe I need to vent. Maybe I need to share a piece of myself

and see if that passes for closeness. Maybe I want to talk about Mama so he doesn't talk about the good or bad date. But I don't stop talking for a half-hour.

I probably say too much, but Allen is quiet and nodding and I want to fill the space with words. I keep thinking of more to say, words I didn't know existed. Maybe they are like the words Mama keeps typing into her laptop, the pieces of her brain she wants to remain private. But why won't she give some of those words to me? Why does everyone want to remain an enigma?

I can't tell this to Allen, so I tell him about people screaming hello at my mother in grocery store aisles.

"She can't move her right hand, but she's not hard of hearing," I say.

"It's tough for people to know what to do when that happens to someone they know," he says. I realize that's true and I should excuse them, but I'm tired of many small things like that, tired and angry. Maybe the anger is to cover the fact that I almost lost her, that the stroke was bad, that they pulled her back from the edge. This much the doctors have told me twice.

"You're doing what you need to do," Allen says, "which is admirable and still difficult."

“Yeah,” I say. It's a good way of putting things, but life is a series of episodes in which one person is a basket case and the other person is a bit stronger and helps the first person get through, then they switch roles and repeat.

It is easier to be angry than scared sometimes. I think that often when I am being a patient. How angry everyone is while waiting in the hospital for words they don't want to hear. They are so very angry because they are so very scared. I understand them too well. I am not quite as nervous every hour waiting for Mama to text. But I am just nervous enough. The fact she remembers, the fact she always sets the egg timer, reminds me she is okay.

§

Sometimes I wish that strokes were more physically dramatic, like when you had a stroke and were partially paralyzed, your limbs actually disappeared, or they were stolen by witches, and slowly reappeared as they gained strength, or didn't. Then maybe Mama's right arm would be hazy, or it would still be gone. It would give me a marker. Then we could go on a quest for the missing limbs and the witches. It would be more interesting than therapy three times a week. I am insufferable. I know that is true. I do not trust her to text, I do not trust her wily body to stay well, I am more needful for her attention than she is for mine.

“I wish,” she says when I get home, which I know means *Hello, how are you, did you have a good day at work, did you notice I texted you every hour? See, I am being responsible, I am perfectly fine.*

§

The amniocentesis came back. Our child may have Downs Syndrome.

“You may want to consider terminating the pregnancy,” the doctor says, consulting her clipboard with the script, but she should know I’m never on script.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I say, making the doctor and Allen start because I haven’t used that word even when playing drunk, but it’s a good word, a hard word, an honest word.

“It is a possibility I have to present to all of my patients when we get these results,” she says. “I’m not saying that—”

“I don’t care what the fuck you meant to say,” I say, “you just said we should consider killing our kid.”

“Well,” she says, “some parents--”

“We are not those parents,” I say. Allen grips my hand to keep me in the chair so I don’t vault over the desk. He can tell that I want to kill the doctor,

even if she's not a doctor yet. I don't know how I got into this headspace because I don't know if I want children, but the doctor said "terminate" like she thinks this is the option we should choose, the option reasonable people would choose, end of story, but her story is not mine.

"You don't think I couldn't deal with a Downs Syndrome child when I've been dealing with so much already?" I say.

"It's standard to present the option to—"

"I don't fucking care about your standards, or the fucking medical community's standards, or anyone who is going to make suggestions about what I should do, like you don't think any good will come from this life because the kid isn't going to fit someone else's definition of normal?"

Allen hugs me tight, his arm flung across my body to stop a physical assault, but I have no sympathy, she signed up for this, I didn't, this is her career, her life, and I'm just muddling through from emotion to emotion, trying to keep my balance.

I close my eyes and I'm shivering, I'm crying, as Allen rocks me. Oh God. I press my eyes tightly together and hear the door open and close, the doctor left, good riddance. Maybe Allen is trembling, or maybe it's just me, lost in the moment that has become too real, the moment when people are told to decide

who lives and dies, and contemplate the power of determining the kind of life that is worth living. I pivot in the chair and hug Allen back, not caring for the moment who the hell he's dating, just needing to pull someone close because maybe he knows as well as I do how we're standing on an edge with just enough sense not to look down too often, because across there is sky and clouds, sunrise and sunset and storm, because the ground is ever shifting, ever loosening, and we know we will slide someday, but maybe possibly not right now.

Teresa Milbrodt is the author of three short story collections: *Instances of Head-Switching*, *Bearded Women: Stories*, and *Work Opportunities*. She has also published a novel, *The Patron Saint of Unattractive People*, and a flash fiction collection, *Larissa Takes Flight: Stories*. Her fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in numerous literary magazines, and her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net award. Milbrodt lives in Salem, Virginia, where she is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Roanoke College. She believes in coffee, long walks with her MP3 player, and writing the occasional haiku. Read more of her work at: <http://teresamilbrodt.com/homepage/>