

## ANGEL OF MERCY

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Just as the last light disappears into the horizon, and the rest of the city of Seattle is preparing to make dinner, I am waking up. I work at a hospital. I am a nurse. I chose this shift because my urges at this time of day are absolutely calm and in a normal state.

I leave my apartment in enough time to make up for the detours. I drive ten miles out of my way to avoid the Loving Hands Child Care Center on Abbott and then drive four miles south so I don't catch a glimpse of The Bright Horizons Children's Day Centers sign on West Hyde and Third. Then I drive five miles in the wrong direction to put me out of sight of the Sugar n Spice Childcare center on Spruce and First. Finally, and this one is the hardest: I drive south to Yesler Avenue, sitting in traffic, risking being late to work to avoid the Childtime Nursery on North Abbot and Fort Sheldon Boulevard.

Preemies are my weakness.

Sure, the detours eat time and gas but it's part of my self-prescribed rehabilitation, and I get to see neighborhoods of Seattle I've never seen before. Like Rome, Seattle also claims to have been built on seven magnificent hills. Four of which I encounter on my drive to work; the views are beyond redemption. Don't let people steer you away from Seattle because of its weather. They'll start tearing it down with how much it rains and cloudy weather, but the truth is that, "The average annual rainfall is actually less than that of many other cities in the United States, including New York and Atlanta." Take that.

During my drive, I call Kendra to get her report on the patients on the 9th floor and then, like passing a baton, she will pass them onto me.

I'll go from room to room, in my white polyester uniform and signature red Crocs, examining the patients' vitals and administering medication as needed. I've even held down a patient who suddenly had a seizure. I have surprisingly strong arms for someone my age (48) and with such a petite frame. Correctional officers in prisons perform rounds that are similar to mine except there aren't quite as many attempts at a hospital break. That's an ongoing joke.

I catch myself yawning while on my rounds. The couple that lives below me in my apartment complex kept me up with their arguing. I am relying on the soothing ritual of preparing my morning herbal tea to center me. Herbal teas calm my mind, relax my body, and help get me agitation-free. The only jolt I get these days is when I "mistakenly" get off on the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit on the 11th floor. That's where the preemies are. It is a dimly lit floor, very intimate yet screaming brightly with pain. I've had my eye on one in particular, to save. Left to myself, I'd save them all. Getting into the elevator and pressing the 11th floor button, then cruising the pods of children on that godforsaken floor has happened once or twice, by accident. Glad to report that beyond looking, I haven't *truly* acted out while there. Not at this hospital.

After making my rounds, I tell Ben—34, married, and God bless him, childless (at this point anyway)—that I am going on break. I get my large wooden box of teas, a 36-ounce bottle of Evian, and my mug from my locker and get into the elevator. My palms sweat. Instead of gliding over the 11th floor button to push 12, which is where the break room is, my hand hovers over it. *Don't you dare press that button. Be wise. Give it more time. You never went to college, much less nursing school. But you work here. You're not dumb. Use your brain. You're new-ish. Blend in. Don't be so selfish. Show some self-control. Don't do anything without a Plan B. Don't do it. Don't. Don't. Don't.*

I use this kind of self-talk to talk myself out of pressing it. If I don't, who will?

The key to a good cup of tea are its leaves. A lot of companies are putting high-quality whole leaf tea into tea bags, or what they in the industry call, "tea sachets." Basically, all tea comes from one plant,

camella sinensis. And what makes it different is where it's grown, how it's grown, and how it's processed afterwards. Trust me, when shopping for teas, you don't want to give Celestial Seasonings a second glance and just erase from your mind, forever, that bright yellow box that features "Lipton" on it.

Today, I am going all out. I'm mixing leaves from Pomegranate, Swedish Berries, Lemon Chamomile, and Ginseng Peppermint into one glorious mug. The shame is that I have to steep my tea in the microwave. It changes not only the experience but also, very slightly—most people wouldn't even notice this, but I do—the taste. This pantry doesn't have a stove and short of bringing in the butane stove I take with me on my camping trips, it has to do. I don't trust the water from the tap and I don't trust the cups in this pantry—germs travel like neutrinos. Hospitals are the least sanitary places in the world. No one is safe.

Zoe Melendez, stout with flaming orange hair and God forgive her, a mother of two—one male, one female—pops her head into the pantry. "Whoa, it smells like wet bark," she says.

"Herbal infusions," I state.

"You're a lightweight," she says with a grin. Her childbearing years are long gone. She grabs a Dunkin Donuts Dark Roast single-serve shot from the glass canister and sticks it in the Keurig. She puts her nose near the coffee that flows out instantly. Her mug has an image of a nurse in an old-fashioned white nurse's cap, whose pointer finger is scolding. The caption underneath reads "Urine Trouble." Zoe pours a generous amount of Hazelnut Creamer Lite into her cup followed by two packets of Sweet'n Low.

"Caffeine! Love it. Need it," she says cheerfully.

*You would die without it*, I mumble under my breath.

"I would die without it," Zoe declares, on cue, as she walks off.

A death rattle, in case someone doesn't know what that is, is a gurgling sound in a dying person's throat. It is similar to the sound a baby rattle makes when it is shaken. These sounds merge the line between new life and death. Is someone dying or is someone entertaining a baby? Who can tell, they both sound the same. You could also say the circle of life

begins and ends with a rattle. Though, in my experience, when a baby dies, within my hands at least, it sounds distinctly like a gulp. A death gulp, but no one but me calls it that.

The families are in shock.

*So many tears.*

Cry me a river.

The doctors are called into question.

The nurses are called into question.

Security cameras?

Who was in charge?

How could this have happened?

The media devours it.

What no one stops to consider is: maybe the baby is better off.

A baby doesn't have the ability to be its own advocate. Someone needs to take responsibility and do what is right, for the child. The child can't be to blame for its life. It wasn't his or her choice to be born. Rape is no way to enter this world, and yet women are raped by their husbands, by strangers or family members on a daily basis, and who wants that child born from rape? No one. Do we think that child wants to be alive in the world surrounded by all that hate, shame, and secrecy? No. And yet, we all selfishly assume they do. Premies speak. With their eyes, they tell the world, "I don't want to be here." We must honor that request with swift ultimate action.

Things they don't teach in nursing schools, in the West anyway, is that teas have numerous health benefits. Green teas' antioxidants can help keep skin clear and prevent heart disease and cancer. Black teas can reduce LDL cholesterol and matcha teas are green tea leaves that have been grounded into a fine powder and are rich in fiber, chlorophyll, and vitamins. Pu'erh and rubies have been linked to stronger immunity and better digestion, and dandelion root teas support the liver, and these are just the most popular.

Walking the hospital's corridors in my Crocs—absorbing its rank smells, hearing its pulse oximeters—I'm subjected to external stimuli that if not monitored, increases my susceptibility. Don't need to stir the

excitement pot by throwing in high-octane caffeinated drinks, espresso shots, chocolate, what have you. I need to keep my emotional motor running on neutral so I don't act out.

At the end of the day though, the most truly effective thing I can do for myself is to keep myself busy with unimportant nonsense, and constantly remind myself that eventually I will be dead.

It works. I'm so untriggered these days that the only thing that keeps me up at night are those white plastic Purell hand sanitizer contraptions that are placed literally every ten feet inside the hospital! The white dollop of antibacterial foam that it dispenses doesn't actually, not sufficiently anyway, get rid of germs but if we don't use them before and after a visit to a patient's room, we will get written up, by other staff members and even, I've been told, by the patients. As if they needed more to complain about! But enough infractions could lead to getting fired and worse, would signal more about me than I care to be known. Then the rules, though. I have to obey. I don't make them up. Rules raise my blood pressure. Rules make me anxious. Rules agitate me. In my entire 48 years, not a day goes by that I don't curse at least one rule.

But, putting things that agitate me into a larger context is everything. So I tell myself: Hand Sanitizers = First World problem! Just put your damn hand under the fucking Purell machine every time you enter and leave a room.

As the campaign says: Just Do It!

99.9 percent of the time I do.

The passing of time in a hospital, much like having to spend the night in an airport, or even playing the slots on a gambling floor in Las Vegas or Atlantic City, has a surreal quality to it. The lack of fresh air, clocks, and windows to tell what time of day it is or what the weather is, makes you feel like you're floating in a submarine. Ungrounded. No sea legs. A false framework to define time. So much so, that after spending twelve hours in a hospital, the next thing I know it is already 6 a.m. My twelve-hour shift has flung by. I check in with myself: I am sufficiently tired, considering how many hours I just put it, and now it is time for me to get an equal amount of sufficient sleep. It has been an uneventful day,

no outbreaks, and gratefully, zero urges. I review my chart so I can give a report to Annika, the nurse who will, like the passing of a baton, be taking over for me. I go to my locker and get my raincoat, keys and box of teas. I chart my drive home.

I live in the new condo complex on Bilson. One bedroom, living room, bathroom, a walk-in closet painted in pale pink in memory of baby Eva, the first life that I saved, and this bonus: a balcony. The balcony looks out onto an outdoor parking garage and shoe repair shop on Stratton, but still, it's better than not having a balcony. The inside of my apartment is decorated in neutral tones. No bright colors, patterned pillows, or elaborately stitched carpeting. It's taken me years of mistakes to figure out what does and does not agitate me. The word these days, actually, is "trigger" but I prefer agitate, it sounds less violent. All my furniture, curtains, bedding, and walls are slight variations of beige. The only viable color is the pale yellow of the crib that sits in the corner of a small room next to my bedroom. And it's a yellow so pale that it doesn't even qualify as pastel. I've been living here for six months and most of my things are still in the darker beige cardboard boxes numbered and stacked high in the corner of my living room. Nothing on the walls yet either.

I plan on hanging my art. The watercolors I make are of nature: hummingbirds, willow, birch and pine trees, and sunrises and sunsets by mountains and lakes. The natural world; it never ceases to astonish me. I have over sixty canvases. After a full day of hiking during my vacations, there is nothing more soothing than taking out my easel—boiling some water in the butane, throwing in some Chamomile tea leaves—and spending the rest of the evening conceiving the environment on canvas, by firelight.

My downstairs neighbors are a young couple, childless as far as I can tell. I rarely see them because of my schedule. The wife: Maria Ponce de Leon is a short, bouncy creature from Colombia. The husband: his name is Tom Sawyer. No kidding. I am not kidding. Maria almost made it into the Olympics as a gymnast. She met Tom at one of her training tournaments. He was a spectator. It didn't take much for her to abandon both her team and her dreams to be with Tom. The minute they got

married, Tom was given a raise and a new title if he would transfer to the Whole Foods here in downtown Seattle.

I run into him now every third Sunday while I'm on the check-out line and occasionally in the shared driveway of our building. He's well aware of my tea consumption, I've seen his eyes darting around my cart while I wait on line to pay, and that's a little more about me than I'd like him to know. I now order my teas from Amazon. Nonetheless, he's taken to confiding in me. I have that kind of face. Like a repository. A face that doesn't respond one way or the other, so people feel free to project whatever they want on me, or it, my face I mean. It sounds worse than it actually is.

One night while I was taking out my garbage to the end of our driveway, Tom was pulling in. Logistics being what they were, we talked. Tom confided in me, alcohol on his breath, that he wanted to have children but that Maria did not. Mostly, he added, she didn't want what it (his word) would do to her body. She didn't want to get fat. As good a reason as any, in my book, but I don't tell him that. I tell him to stop complaining and thank his lucky stars. I tell him to get down on his hands and knees and worship the woman who is exercising her right to choose. He walked away with an earful. What I didn't tell him was that if Maria did have a baby, I would have to move; the temptation would be too great. Best to keep my eye on the (proverbial) balance beam. That's a joke.

With my raincoat in hand, I walk to the break room to sign out. Vince, a good-looking, suave Filipino, father of twin girls—God help them all—is assisting patient #24, a middle-aged woman just out of back surgery, across the hallway to her room.

"Hey," he says as I pass by.

"Hi Vince," I say.

"Look, can you do me a favor. Our babysitter flunked out on us. Can you take my shift today?"

I recall how great it feels to see the extra zeros in my paycheck. I remind myself that I am feeling so urge-free today.

So I say yes.

I say yes because being asked to take someone's shift doesn't come up very often. I say yes because I recall how actually great it feels to push or

not to push the 11th floor button while in the elevator. I say yes because there are those out there, still sick and suffering, that I need to save. Through my elation or confusion, I hear, though it is as if from a great distance, him saying, "I owe you big time."

I walk back to my locker to put my coat away. Well, this day has certainly turned out different. I mean I had a plan, a solid plan to drive home after my shift, unpack a box or two, hang a painting, make tea and go to sleep. Then, I got this invitation, from Vince, to work his shift, and I said yes. Let me get this straight: I disrupted all my other plans. I *disregarded my fatigue* and I said yes.

I am going to need bionic support. The combination of lack of sleep, depletion of energy, dehydration, and too much fluorescent lighting after another consecutive twelve hours of working in a hospital would turn anyone, not just me, into a monster. Monster is the word given to humans who do certain acts that other humans can't imagine a human being capable of doing. The monster sits silently within us, waiting to be called. And if you live long enough, things in life build to a point where the monster doesn't wait anymore. It just acts.

Taking on an additional twelve hours and I am at risk. But I won't let it get me. I'll protect myself. I will use what I call my Smart Feet to take me to the Enfamil baby formula in the supply room on the 10th floor. I just have to tell a small lie in order to get it, but it is for the greater good. If I didn't take care of myself in this way, who would?

As I have been up for 18 hours already, and my quality of thought is slightly off, I can tell that I'm going to quaff at least two bottles of the stuff. The boost it will give me is superior to that of drinking Red Bulls, eating chocolate, or popping Uppers. I'll cap it by going into a stairwell and meditating for fifteen minutes. The combination of formula and meditation has, in the past, kept him/her/it at bay. Proof is in the pudding: for the past six months that I have been employed in this hospital, using this combo, I've been a good girl. Knock on wood.

As a precaution, I walk instead of taking the elevator up to the nurses' station on 10. Rachael is the only one on today which in itself is a little

strange. Rachael, early thirties, Rachael, who has given birth twice, is at least sixty pounds overweight (who knows she might even be pregnant again), with long fake nails that she polishes with relish, sits behind the desk.

"Hi Rach," I say using my "warm" smile face and "casual" voice. She looks up from her Sudoku. "You still here?" she says.

"I'm covering for—"

"Again!"

We look at each other.

"Well—" she says.

I get to my point. "Two Enfamils."

She pauses.

"How do you do it?" she asks.

Is this a trick question? I compose my face.

"Do what?" I say flatly.

"Not gain weight."

I take my glasses off and clean the lenses with a tissue from one of the many boxes on her desk. "In our profession, we have choices. It's all night sitting around doing Sudoku," I say with a "just-shootin'-the-shit" tone of voice, eyeing her book. "Some of us do the crossword, others play Word Search or," I say, kicking my foot up, "others spend their shift walking. Visiting patients that don't necessarily need visiting."

Rachael looks at me blankly.

"Visiting patients on other floors, perhaps," I say, maybe a little too freely, based on the suspicious look I detect on Rachael's face. "I walk a lot," I say quickly.

"Oh," she says.

"In answer to your question."

I walk away with my bottles and wondered if she read my face in the way that I wanted to be read. As early as first grade, I was absolutely certain that I was different from other people. I felt like an outsider looking in on my own life, and I saw nothing there. I feared others saw it too: a gaping black hole of numb nothingness. My goal, I felt, was to re-create what being a—*normal*—a *real person* was so as not to be ridiculed.

I studied the real people around. A person who cries when she is hit, a person who laughs when someone tells a joke, a person who is sad if the pet guinea pig dies, so I could fit in. So I wouldn't stand out.

And now, as a nurse, the goal is even greater because of the patients. People think that if you go into a caring profession, that you actually do—care. And that might be true, at the start. But in truth, some nurses don't have the capacity to care and that is fine. They work in the ICU because the patients are not demanding, and/or too out of it to notice one way or the other. That's where I should have ended up, but since I've gotten so good at imitating empathy, I can work in any department.

Well into the twenty-first hour of the shift, my mind is racing, while at the same time I am calming myself down by breathing in on one and exhaling on four. With just three hours to go, I can make it. I cruise past the Visitors Desk that bisects the intensive care with the radiation unit. One of the visitors stands with her back to me. She is wearing worn-out jeans, sneakers and a striped tank top. She is inquiring about a patient. Why is she here so late at night? Is it to see her drunken cousin who slipped on black ice and crashed his truck? Or was she out with a group of her friends on prom night and one of them tried to commit suicide? Or had one of them gotten into a fight and then was stabbed? These are common scenarios that bring people to the ICU on any given Saturday night. Maybe this girl is related to the patient who ended up in the ICU. Brother? Sister? Uncle? Best Friend Forever?

The girl turns to leave and my eyes blur from the sweat that has immediately dripped into them. She has the tiniest baby swaddled in a tied-dyed patterned cloth. It's more like a sagging lump, not much bigger than a large guinea pig, slung across her tiny chest. I follow her.

I can't help myself.

I hope not to do anything bad.

Don't mess things up.

The girl—she can't be more than twelve years old, obviously not even a teenage mother—turns left down Corridor C. I walk faster to keep up with her. Most likely she didn't realize what was going on, not at first, her father coming into her bed to sleep next to her at night. Her mother

dead just a month, or was it a week? Then, the long hugs and wrestling "games" he played with her. She probably didn't even catch on when he took her to Disneyland. Did she ever see Mickey or Minnie or go on the Pirates ride, like he had promised? No, he kept her in the hotel room, and made her act like everything they did in there was normal. All she remembers now is just how misshapen and crooked she felt when anyone looked at her.

Then, she probably thought it was the dozens of Krispy Kreme doughnuts she ate that were causing her stomach, thighs, and breast to bulge. When it struck her like lightning that the tiny life growing inside of her was his, who could she tell? Her mother had died in a lake during a summer vacation when she was eleven years old. She had no friends, her father had seen to that, monitoring her comings and goings like a lab rat.

She tried to save baby Eva's life out of existence by drinking Clorox. But she failed her. How many times had she tried to run away, only to be picked up in that car of his, "GET IN!" he'd say. How many bottles of ivory Maybelline foundation had she used to cover up the bruises from his hitting her every time she tried to fight him off? How many times had she climbed to the roof hoping to land on her belly, only to be grabbed back in the window? She couldn't fail as a good mother anymore. The only moment of pure unadulterated peace that couldn't be taken away, by him, or anyone, was the moment I placed my hands around its tiny throat and with the pads of my thumbs, pressed the life out of it. My father raped me and I took it back. Success. Suddenly, the tables had turned.

Having left no trace of evidence, she was innocent until proven guilty, so far at least. Not about baby Eva, not about baby Grace in the hospital in Chicago, or Baby Annie in the hospital in Florida, Baby Catherine in the Tiny Kids After Care in Kansas or Baby Elizabeth in the neonatal ward in North Dakota. If I work as smartly as I always have, Seattle will be added. The thrill of saving a life rockets me into a fourth dimension. It is hands down the only thing worth living for.

The noise from the poor, tortured, helpless girl in the ICU with the screaming baby swaddled over her chest is so loud, I have to cover my ears.

Why can't everyone hear it? I speed-walk down corridor three, zooming past patients.

Patient number 43, a wide elderly man with a walker, wearing his puke green hospital gown and slippers, is out of his room taking a hallway stroll.

The length of his walker takes up so much space that when I try to go past him, I can't.

We stare at each other. He recognizes me, I think.

But, I have red hair now. I wear glasses, now.

My name is Margaret Whitte, now. It says so on my badge.

I move to the left, he moves to the right, and we shuffle like this until I am so agitated by the look of horror on his delicate face that I push him aside. "Get out of my fucking way," I say.

"You," he croaks, raising a shriveled finger at me.

"You're crazy," I say. "Get back in your bed, or I'll report you."

I race past him to the end of the hall to catch them. But that suffering girl and her suffering child are gone. They have left the hospital.

My heart and mind are racing 900 miles an hour. I lean against the wall and slide down to the floor. I failed her. Sweat pours over my body. I heard her pleas to be saved and I failed. Pick yourself up I tell myself. It is never too late for redemption, I tell myself.

My mind has gone blind from the acute pressure stabbing at my temples, and into my brain.

Smart feet take me to the elevator.

Smart hands press #11 and without hesitation, I get out and walk towards salvation.