Storytelling

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I pound both fists against the glass until I cannot tell where the pain stops and the world begins. I scream his name. “David! David!” - over and over until the sound bounces back off the paneled window and hits me in the face.

For a furious moment tears blind me, but when my eyes clear I can still see him walking across the parking lot; a figure growing smaller between endless rows of rain-streaked cars. My bricked-up shadow stretches out over him, though he seems not to see it.

Night falls and I stand still so the moon doesn’t see me waiting for David to come back. When the moon-glow rises beyond my view I seize my chance.

“You can’t, you won’t leave me here!” I shout at the shivering glass. I clench my narrow jaw and take one determined step back on the worn carpet. I am a fragile figure in a hospital gown, but have the strength within me to break free. I stand there for a moment, close my eyes and feel the empty space calling me forward, but then hear the door smoothly opening behind me. Their feet pound across the room, trying to keep me from escaping, but I fling myself toward the glass. I scream in exaltation: they are too late.

There is an instant’s pinprick of pain and then I am floating in the sky over the darkened cement rectangles. I am the clouds and the stars, I am part of the night breeze, and “Where’s David?” I search for him everywhere, in the shadows behind each car and “David? Where are you hiding? Why won’t you come back to me?”

I toss and turn and with one sudden arm motion knock the glass off my bedside table. It bounces with a hollow clatter. Plastic. I hate it for pretending to be real. The nurse slips into the room and hovers above me.

“Good morning Emily,” she says as she picks up the empty cup, “Is everything all right?”

She’s just waiting for me to give up all my secrets.

I ignore her and eye my large, twelfth story window. I could fly out of it, take wing above the earth and escape forever. Soar like the red swirls that spiral into darkness. Blackness.

There’s a sudden, sharp light that cuts into me. I jump up to run and hide, but can’t move. Bars are holding my thin body flat to the white sheets, and the nurse leans in with another syringe.

“No, please don’t,” I beg. “I’ll be good; I’ll tell you a story. Please. I’m good at making up stories.”

My gathering of days in the hospital leached the remaining color from the ever-raining sky until life was shades of grey. Soon hours went by without the nurse peeking through the safety window in my non-locking door, no longer trying to catch me spinning in the center of a kaleidoscopic universe. They (a fitting name for the uniformed, faceless hordes) began pulling me out into the taupe hallways and trying to convince me that schizophrenic Sally and paranoid Peter are my equals. But I won’t play their kindergarten games.

There is only one bright ember in this ashen existence. The brightest spark is during the darkest time of day, when the parking lot lights, like night-blossoming tropical fruit, hang in dimly glowing clusters below my window. I have pretended to take my medicine already, distracted the automaton with carefully worded comments about the weather, weekend, water dripping from my stained ceiling. Now I am free to dream of David. I stand wrapped in the dusty curtains, no longer afraid of even the moon, for I have told her that she cannot have David.

“He is mine.”

I wind my brown curls around and around one finger and inhale deeply until I can breathe in David’s summer scent as he walks softly across the room, putting his arms around me from behind.

“Isn’t it a beautiful night?” he says. “Let’s get out of here.”
Sometimes I watch his stooped back wearily walking to the car and slowly driving away, other nights I have to imagine his face as I gaze up at the blurred, indistinct stars.

“Good night David,” I whisper.

Then I wake up in the morning to only the ghost of his memory steadily fading in the early light. Or I did, until David brightened one cloudy day with the gleam of sunshine, the glow of a yellow date book. One of the nurses, my constant shadow, gave me it to me. My particular shadow is as stiff as the cardboard cutout of a nurse, holding herself like a mountain oblivious to earthquakes, even as unrest radiates out from my agate eyes. She left the bright book on the scarred counter, walking briskly away from it with her military gait. I gathered it up eagerly and, so she would not see how much I wanted it, tucked it under my faded paisley gown, holding it flat against my stomach with casual fingers.

The next morning Sally told me the nurse was looking for it. The nurse must have forgotten she gave her planner to me, so I hurriedly slipped it under my lumpy pillow. I won’t let her take the gift back.

“Hypocrite, hypocrite, Indian giver,” I chant in my head as she questions me suspiciously about it, her shifty eyes darting around my narrow room.

“No,” I tell her. “I haven’t seen it. Maybe it was one of the visitors; they could have snatched it and disappeared before you noticed. Or maybe you gave it to someone and then forgot.”

Once she is gone I cradle her planner in my arms. It is the treasure chest holding the greater gift. Inside the front cover is a crumpled sticky note with eight numbers scrawled in purple ink. The code for the ever-locked doors. This yellow book is the map that will take me back to David.

“He must have told the nurse to give it to me. I knew he would not abandon me here.”

I stroll casually out of the tall glass doors, pushing the handle out with my sleeve so I won’t leave any fingerprints behind. There’s no way I will let them catch me and take me back to the twelfth floor.

Clarissa’s stiletto boots, a size too big for my small feet, cluck along the cracked sidewalk and I wrap Noelle’s leather jacket closer around me. The wind gathers behind me and urges me forward, another November leaf blown out into the world.

I follow the map inside my head to David’s apartment. I grin as it towers above me, wanting to shout so the whole city can hear that I have come to rescue him. I picture David, the anxious prisoner. I am the conquering hero coming to save him from the oven breathing dragon. “Wait, who’s the dragon? Dragon, dragon. No, Emily, don’t think about that, focus on David. David.. Dragon. David and the Dragon.” I repeat this to myself, waiting for it to suddenly make sense, as I climb the stairs. The shifting boots make it tricky, so I have plenty of time to try and figure it out.

He won’t open the door, so I keep knocking. “You have to be home so I can rescue you,” I tell the empty, hopeless hallway.

Then, his angelic voice drifted up to me. I leaped down the stairs two and three at a time, soaring down to where I knew David was waiting for me at the bottom.

And there he was; David stood in the entry way looking up as I jumped down the last few steps. His hands clutched plastic grocery bags bulging with prepackaged food. A short, round woman was waiting behind him, and I waited for David to move. He would let her pass and then rush to me, dropping cans and boxes heedlessly, letting apples bounce and roll across the dark tiles, but David stood still.

“David,” I said, “It’s me, Emily. They released me today. I came to tell you.”

He stooped slowly and set the bags down, straightened up to his lanky, ex-basketball star height. David took one cautious step forward.

“It’s okay, just calm down,” David said.

I wondered who he was talking to. His brown eyes were nervous and he kept looking back over his shoulder at the round woman frozen in the doorway even as he inched toward me. I could feel him trying to weave a web of words around me, holding me in place with soft, insistent phrases, but never using my name.
As the web grew, I felt a spider nestle in the tangled curls at the top of my neck. I shivered. I looked straight at the strange woman for the first time, meeting her owl eyes.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Emily and this is my David.”

I could feel a smile spreading across my face as I sidestepped David, and walked toward her. I trailed my right hand along the wall, feeling the greasy wallpaper slide past beneath my fingers. Clarissa’s (or were they Cassandra’s?) boots echoed in the silence, along with ragged breathing.

I could rescue David now. I had found the dragon.

There are no windows in this room, no way to watch for David’s return. They dragged me here, suits as dark as their souls; no one listened to my stories, my explanations. Now I am a prisoner again.

I have nothing to do but sit at the polished table that reflects a distorted face up at me; sit and think about David. Then he walked into the room and it is instantly brighter with him in it.

“David!” I said, leaping up and whirling across the room. However, he is gone before I can touch him, his blank face replaced by the unadorned walls. I sink down onto the cool floor, patterned skirt wilting around me like a stemless flower.

I clench my cold fingers and repeat David’s name until I can see through the mirror to where David stands stiffly, arms folded across his chest to keep him from reaching for me. I catch his gaze and try to will him through the glass. “If I call him enough times, tell him the right things, he will come back. David always comes back.”

Hours pass, and David is still so far away, separated by walls no words can break. From the stillness around me seeps the hum of violins. Somewhere, someone is playing Pachelbel’s Canon. Da dun. Dun dun, I hum.

My mom watches my careful steps with a smile on her face and a gun in her hand, the same rust-streaked gun she held eight years ago to her crimson hair, after telling one last story.

David is waiting by the altar with a black robed priest who resembles my cousin Richard, same shiny hair and scarred face, with hands that look as if they’ve never held a Bible before.

I run to David, as all my life I have been running, until I strike the wall with each bone in my body, my poor Davidless body.

I am frozen and burning and falling awake as the Northern Lights erupt from beyond the Styrofoam-tiled ceiling.

“I tried to tell you a story,” I sob. “I’m good at storytelling. Don’t you believe me? Please David, you have to believe me. I love you. You know I could never have hurt you. Her, I could easily tossed into the overfull dumpster behind your apartment, but you David, you can let me out now because I will always protect you.”

My words come through a waterfall of tears, my soul trying to communicate from underwater, miles out of depth of the sun. I sink into the scuffed floor, far from the sound of David’s voice, left with only his pleading eyes: hoping, deceiving, loving, leaving.

“David. David!”