

LAST TRAIN TO OMAHA

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“Limited” from Chicago Poems by Carl Sandburg.

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LAST TRAIN TO OMAHA

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*This book is dedicated to my mother, Danielle Galletta,
who always dreamed of writing a book one day
and
to my father, Tony Whitely,
for his courage and never ending creativity.*

INTRODUCTION

A funny thing happens to you when you hear the words “you have cancer.” Your inner and outer worlds change completely and stay forever in this new vein, never allowing you to return to what you once knew about yourself and your everyday life.

I recall years ago listening to an interview with award-winning actress after she had been recently diagnosed with breast cancer. She explained that even the simplest of things like a book on a shelf becomes sharper and more defined to the naked eye, as if its mere existence illuminated a more profound clarity. I was drawn into the wonder of what it would be like to face such a disease—one so powerful that your life would dangle in the balance.

While a part of me found the description of her experience quite haunting, there was an element of peace and beauty in the fact that she could see light under such dire circumstances. Little did I know that a few years later I would face the very same fate.

On January 13, 2012, I was diagnosed with ductal carcinoma in my left breast. At the age of forty eight and with four wonderful children and an amazing husband, the thought of having to fight for my life consumed me. Much like the famous actress had described, all things tangible and real began to pop out in front of me with more intensity and force. Fear and happiness constantly battled for my devoted attention, both winning a round or two during each match. Every day was a struggle to try and understand *why* this was happening to me. At same time, I fought relentlessly to remain faithful to all the blessings in my life, despite having cancer. My inconsistent emotional state started to wear me down as I withdrew from family and friends. I was alone in my newfound state and desperate for resolve.

My surgery occurred quite quickly after my diagnosis and with it came this unwarranted feeling of abandonment. Now that the cancer was out, I was forced to wait for more tests to see whether it had spread into my nodes and if I would require chemotherapy. The feeling of isolation became more intense, and I wanted more than anything to face my destiny but I wasn't sure how.

Shortly after, my niece and a friend, who is also a cancer survivor, recommended I read the book *Anticancer* by the amazing Dr. David Servan-Schreiber—a leading scientist in his expertise of mental health disease, and a cancer survivor of nearly twenty years. I devoured the information in this book and would spend hours going over several chapters and taking notes about nutrition for my mind and body. Despite the fact that I was determined to believe I would not die from this disease, I felt compelled to read the chapter on the passage towards death. It was oddly morbid and yet, in the same breath mesmerizing and enlightening.

In this particular chapter, Dr. Servan-Schreiber references another author by the name of Dr. Scott Peck known for his theories on the acceptance of death as an essential part of life and is often referenced as quoting the poem “Limited” by American poet Carl Sandburg, as a metaphor for his philosophy on the subject.

I went to bed after reading that chapter of the book and instantly began thinking about why death's looming presence is not independent of its inevitability. The more I thought about the one and only thing that no one can avoid, the closer I came to my own conclusion: Life and death are very much connected within each and every moment randomly captured and released within the realm of our mortal existence.

Before I fell asleep, I focused on the importance of living my life in the grander scheme and on the idea that *none* of us should merely schlep through only for the sake of enduring the daily demands and sometimes-onerous routines. I had, after all, succumbed to that very viewpoint for years and it was time to change direction.

When I woke up the next morning, I told my husband that I had a dream about a man who was afraid to live his life and make connections with others because of something traumatic that had occurred in his youth, and that his only release was during the hours in which he volunteered at a veterans' home. You can only imagine the look on my husband's face when I began to recount the names of the characters in my dream. When I stopped talking, he took me by my shoulders and said, “you must write this book.”

With his encouragement, and the love and support of so many people, I did just that. This is my first novel and so I humbly present it to you as such.

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Writing this story has been extremely cathartic. It allowed me to explore my own spiritual epiphanies and begin my physical and emotional healing. I hope that it inspires others to seek clarity in the simplest forms of life.

In closing, my story is not only about the characters that fill the pages, but also about all of us who share in this world of definite qualms and uncertainties. It is these very reservations in life that miraculously defines who we were meant to be during our journey here, and in the end summarizes what became of us.

*I AM riding on a limited express, one of the crack trains
of the nation.*

*Hurling across the prairie into blue haze and dark air
go fifteen all-steel coaches holding a thousand people.
(All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men
and women laughing in the diners and sleepers shall
pass to ashes.)*

*I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he
answers: "Omaha."*

- "Limited", Carl Sandburg

Lisle, Illinois – August 3, 1995

The hot sun beats down on Saint Joan of Arc Catholic Church, illuminating its stained glass windows and causing beams of light to crisscross above the dark oak benches inside. Stephen Pike, a once-vibrant eighteen-year-old, is being laid to rest today in his hometown, a full ten days after the bizarre accident that took his life and shocked the community. His family expected a smaller, more intimate service, but as homage would dictate, the turnout is much larger than anyone imagined. Students and teachers from all grades of Lisle High School cram into the small church, filling all of the pews and leaving nothing but standing room for those who arrive close to the scheduled starting time. The heat accumulating inside is unbearable and amplifies the intensity of grief being shared amongst the crowd.

James Milligan sits in the first pew, heavily sedated on Xanax and paralyzed by the entire ordeal. He has been unable to process the accident since it happened. The images of Stephen's death burn behind his heavy eyes and continue to burrow into the depths of his memory like an aggressive carcinoma. His mind and body float over the ceremony as it commences. A familiar voice vibrates towards his ears in his semi-conscious state.

Stephen's Uncle Patrick is standing at the altar, hunched over the podium and leading the eulogy. "He was a dynamic person with a golden soul and a mischievous mind. He can never be replaced ..." he recites, barely maintaining his composure.

The sound of people weeping makes James agitated and he fantasizes about escaping somehow. Sweat pours down his temples, leaving him drenched in his own perspiration and sealing his claustrophobic skin into his dark suit. By the end of the service, nausea takes over and he cannot bear to attend the burial with the rest of his family. Instead, he breaks away from the milling crowd and makes his way to Stephen's house, now occupied only by Stephen's parents, Lynn and Dean Pike.

The Pikes' home has always been like a second home to James, and yet, as he enters the family room he is overtaken by a feeling of unfamiliar discomfort. A musty smell seeps out of the ten-year-old brown shag rug that covers the amber-stained maple floor. The pale beige drapes are hanging open slightly, allowing a beam of sunlight to pierce through and enticing streams of dust to glimmer around the room. As James sits down, the dark checkered couch sinks beneath his weight and has a damp feel that embraces him as he remembers the many times he and Stephen fell asleep on it. A large taupe pillow is placed on either end, and a small embroidered pillow is perched in the middle. He fingers the embroidery, recalling how he and Stephen used to toss it around football style. James allows himself a minute to hold it tightly in his hands, until the memory begins to plague him with more pain and forces him to move.

After pacing the floor for a few minutes, he finally rests in the most reasonable piece of furniture in the room—the dump, as the boys used to call the old rust-colored La-Z-Boy. He pictures Stephen blessing the chair with that name after a night of indulging in heavy weed and Russian vodka. Another wave of sadness delivers a blow to his chest. Without thinking, he gravitates to a pile of videos on the corner of the television stand and starts to rummage through them curiously. The one that stands out is labeled “Home-ward Bound.” He pops it into the video machine as he makes himself comfortable on the floor.

The video starts with a montage of early still shots of the Pike family, starting from before Stephen was even born. Close family members and friends stream across the television screen.

A sea of black surrounds James on the inside as he listens to the sounds of Simon and Garfunkel playing over the images. He recognizes his younger sister Kitty and his mother and father, Janice and Aaron Milligan, as the camera zooms in on them. The next images are of Stephen's mother and father, Lynn and Dean Pike, in the kitchen preparing for a barbeque. Suddenly, a very young version of himself and Stephen come running in with water bombs. Lynn starts chasing them out. The footage skips momentarily and reappears with images

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of Stephen and James at their high school graduation just a few weeks before. Stephen is roughing up James's hair and pulling out his bowtie. He flicks a cigarette at the camera. His mother Lynn chases him around the front porch and scolds him. Stephen is laughing as he imitates her. The video trails off into a turbulent flow of static. James waits for more visuals to appear, but like the void in his heart, there's nothing left.

ONE

Chicago, Illinois – September 2011

James is sitting peacefully at his kitchen table, sipping his coffee absently and staring out the window of his seventeenth-floor condominium in the heart of downtown Chicago. It's a beautiful fall morning with a clear blue sky and the weather channel is describing the day ahead to be a warm Indian summer-like day with blustery winds. Despite the good weather forecast, an overwhelming dread seizes him as he is reminded of his obligatory family celebration today. He turns to look at his BlackBerry to check his work schedule, but is interrupted by a phone call. Call display tells him it's his sister Kitty and he answers it reluctantly.

Her voice booms through the speakerphone. "Happy birthday, big brother!"

"Thanks." James tries to sound grateful, but his lack of enthusiasm gives him away.

"Okay, well, too bad for you," she scoffs, immediately taking control of the conversation. Kitty has always been a domineering person, but he loves her despite his intolerance.

"Mom is on for dinner tonight, and so is Jake. Seven o'clock at Madrid's Café."

"Uh huh," he replies, intentionally distracting himself by channel surfing.

She pushes on with the details and asks if he is planning to come by the hospital to see Rick Miesner. Rick is a Vietnam veteran and the best friend of their late father, Aaron. He has been in palliative care for over a year, and his health is steadily declining.

"He's been asking for you," Kitty announces, then pauses briefly to accompany the silence on the other end. "Stop channel surfing!" she barks, hoping to grab her brother's attention.

He instantly looks away from the television and takes her off speakerphone. "Got it."

“Lunch hour is a good time to come, especially since we’re going out for your birthday dinner tonight,” she states.

“Okay, I got it, Kitty!” he snaps, grabbing his jacket off the back of the kitchen chair. “I have to go now. I’m late.”

“Good, so I’ll see you this afternoon then. Try to be happy, Jimmy. You’re thirty-five today,” she sings with enthusiasm.

James ignores her advice as he tries to locate his keys and portfolio case. He stops suddenly and backs up to the living area, where he pinches some fish food between his fingers and drops it into the tank. A large Arabian angelfish swims to the surface. James heads towards the door and exits, barely paying attention to Kitty’s persistent nagging on the other end of the line as they finish their conversation.

Morning rush hour is a painful experience for James. People are scrambling to get to their destinations on time, and it never ceases to amaze him how annoyed it makes him every single morning. He listens to a talk radio station as he deviates through the clogged traffic until he finally reaches the lineup to get into the underground parking garage of the Willis Tower on Wacker Drive, in the heart of Chicago’s West Loop.

He takes a deep breath to ease his anxiety and seizes the opportunity to look over his agenda. Glancing at his BlackBerry, he sees that his day is loaded with meetings and his inbox is already filled with messages. Unlike his personal life, his professional life is well intact and nothing about the insanity of his daily work schedule fazes him. Leaving his car and his prime parking spot, he rushes over to the elevator and nods to a colleague. The man is on his cellphone, but acknowledges James with a quick smile. They both work for Barnes and Miller Architecture and Design on the twenty-first floor.

The office is posh and exudes grandeur and wealth. Passing the front desk, he is struck by the beauty of the young receptionist who happily acknowledges him.

“Good morning, Mr. Milligan,” she says, trying to please.

“Morning.” As usual, James is quick with a sparse response. He walks by several small cubicles occupied by colleagues and subordinates who all regurgitate the same morning salutation. His response to each is lame and repetitious.

He enters his stylish office and immediately notices the message light on his phone flashing. Before he can settle in, his assistant Jade saunters through the door to hand over four message slips and a revised agenda. She is a young and curvaceous Mediterranean woman in her early thirties and is most definitely in control of her job. Her daily duty is to faithfully and meticulously govern James’s every working hour.

“You’ve got a hectic schedule today. You sure you’ve got time to go to the hospital?” she asks.

James smirks. “How do you know I’m going there today?” he asks, completely

aware of Jade's insightfulness into his business.

She stands tall over his desk with her hands hugging her luscious hips. James notices how nicely her form squeezes into her gray pinstriped pencil skirt. "Because Kitty called here looking for you earlier, and it's never a quick and dirty conversation with her." She smiles at him playfully.

James notices how her eyes twinkle as the words quick and dirty roll off her plump ruby lips. Her long bronze hair is in a sleek ponytail that falls past her shoulder blades. James is almost mesmerized by her profound sexiness and can't help but stare at her.

"Hello? I said, 'do you want anything from the cafe?'" Jade asks, obviously repeating herself.

Embarrassed, James snaps out of his daze and shuffles around uncomfortably in his chair. "Oh. Yeah, uh ... the usual coffee, please."

"Sure thing, boss," she says, turning to leave. He rests his eyes on her round behind as it passes through his doorway.

Glancing down at the small pile of phone messages in his hand, he sees that Lynn Pike has called to wish him a happy birthday. He rubs the palms of his hands over his face and stares out the window, trying to find a way to ignore the message. He looks at his other messages and scribbles down a few notes for Jade to act on when she returns.

When he flips on his computer, he sneers at the calendar invite that immediately pops up. Kitty has sent a reminder of the dreaded dinner plans for the evening.

"Nice look." His colleague and work friend, Ty Henderson, is leaning up against the doorframe. His slight athletic frame complements his perfectly sculpted face, and his ostentatious attire oozes confidence. Shades of pale pink and gray show off his dark brown skin.

"Wish I could say the same about yours," James jokes, looking his colleague over.

Ty pretends not to hear. "Listen, man, can you make the Deagan meeting with me? It starts in five, and I could really use your design expertise."

"Of course you need me there," James spouts, grinning for the first time that morning. "Your mother breastfed you until you were nine, hence the reason for your vexatious codependence issue."

"Screw you," Ty scoffs. "But I appreciate the observation so much that your next hooker is on me."

James serves up another shot. "You do have the pimp look about you today," he snorts, looking Ty up and down. "You're missing your fedora, though. Is it at mommy's brothel?"

Before Ty can strike back with another comment, Jade gently pushes him aside.

“Down, boys,” she hisses, then places a tray of coffee on the round table in the corner of the spacious office.

As she bends and twists her hips, both men notice how lovely she is, with her beautiful shiny hair and skin the color of Milk Duds. Noticing Ty’s stare, James makes an effort to look away. “Thanks, Jade,” he says, passing her some of the phone messages. “Can you please call these two clients back to see what they want? And could you try to reschedule my meetings this afternoon?”

“Will do. I’ll hold down the fort,” she says confidently.

Ty interrupts their obvious connection. “Forgive me for interrupting this lovely scene, but Jimmy, do we not have a meeting to attend?”

“Papa Bear comin’ to the rescue again, I see?” Jade asks, batting her eyes at him.

“It’s a good thing I like you, girl,” Ty responds, smiling, then turns to James. “Come on, my man, let’s go.”

The two men make their way past the window offices lined up against the south end of the floor and enter a very sleek and modern boardroom. The scenery through the floor-to-ceiling windows is spectacular, and the room is filled with bright sunlight. There are a dozen or so high-back black leather chairs around a long cherry-wood table. Several businessmen in their late forties and early fifties are already sitting around the table. Some are chatting, while a few others wait quietly as Ty and James enter the room. Ty sits at the head of the table and James takes the chair on his right.

Ty introduces James as one of the firm’s chief architectural design experts. He goes on to explain why theirs is the best firm to take on the project, and how Barnes and Miller fully understands the need to enhance the downtown’s current transit lines. “The Bus Rapid Transit line will serve hubs like Union Station and the Ogilvie Transportation Center. And consider the potential for BRT lines along Western and Ashland,” Ty continues, doing his best to pitch the proposal.

James steps in to discuss the firm’s vision for the transit line’s architectural design, citing that it would complement one of the country’s most historically famous structures—Union Station.

His BlackBerry goes off in the middle of his presentation. He quickly looks down at the number and sees that it’s the hospital. “I’m terribly sorry, but I have to take this,” he says, looking at the irritated faces around the table. “Ty, please continue on my behalf.” Ty gives him a dirty look, but James ignores it and excuses himself before stepping into the hall.

It’s Kitty calling to explain that Rick’s situation is getting worse. “We don’t think he’s going to make the day,” she explains. “His blood pressure is dropping and his organs are shutting down. I’m sorry, Jimmy. I know how close the two of you are.”

James takes a deep breath and tries to shrug off her sentiment. “It’s fine. I’ll be

there. I'm leaving now." He finds Jade on his way out of the building. "Listen, tell Ty I'm really sorry but I had to leave on an urgent matter."

Jade acknowledges his request without asking any questions. He knows that Kitty's already told her about the veterans he sees at the hospital on a weekly basis.

The drive to the hospital is quick and easy. The usual big-city rush hour that plagues the main highway is at a lull for the time being, and James enjoys having the quiet time and space to himself. Twenty minutes later, he pulls into the parking lot of the Aaron Milligan Veterans' Hospital, a long-term and palliative care hospital for veterans that was built by his grandfather, Fionn Milligan, in 1942.

His grandfather was one of Chicago's most prominent architects and wartime combat engineers. He was summoned to France in 1944 to work with the United States Army and assist with the design and construction of bridges, particularly Bailey and portable steel bridges to enhance road access and transportation loads for the larger, more modern American tanks. His grandfather named the hospital after his firstborn son, Aaron, before he departed for Europe in the event he would not return to see him grow up. As it was, he would not. Just two days before he was due to return home, his truck hit a German mine north of Carentan and he died instantly.

James's frequent visits to the hospital are constant reminders of the grandfather he never met, but came to know and love through the endless stories about him and the legendary photographs that covered the walls of his home growing up. Unfortunately, the name of the hospital is also a cold reminder of the father he actually did have growing up, but whom he never really knew.

He approaches the elevator and notices a woman in her late seventies impatiently pushing the button. She appears frail and somber. Her wrists are small and delicate. James fears that if she pushes the button one more time her feeble wrist might snap. A small poppy-print purse dangles from the crook of her right arm. Blue veins and deep brown spots are visible on her weathered and worn skin. He quickly looks away, uncomfortable with the feeling of empathy that is filling up his insides.

The elevator arrives and James steps in to hold the door for the woman. She quietly mumbles her thanks, and he asks her which floor. She indicates the fourth, and he pushes the button to take them up to the palliative care wing. He suddenly recognizes the woman. She is related to one of the men dying there—Hans Webber is her older brother. She's been there several times over the past month, and although never formally introduced, James has seen her with Hans in the ward several times. As she steps off the elevator, James takes her arm to assist her.

"How is Hans doing today, ma'am?" he asks softly.

The small-framed woman looks up at James with her ancient gray eyes and a smile curls upwards. Her voice shakes out a rattling sound. "Oh, he's just fine, thank you, son."

An orderly is pushing her brother out of his room and down the hall to meet her. She unwraps her arm from James's and eagerly shuffles forward to meet him.

James watches her attempt to quicken her step and feels an ache in his stomach. He wonders yet again about the inevitable process of life moving towards death—the chance to age, which can be cruel and insufferable, versus not having the opportunity to do so. He's distracted by the sound of Kitty's voice nearby, and he turns to catch sight of her down the hall talking to a doctor.

Although he doesn't want to acknowledge it, she looks beautiful when she's pregnant. With one hand on her porpoise-like belly, she signals to James with the other that she'll be with him in a minute. The doctor hands over the chart and she commences the long waddle back towards the reception desk where James is standing. They embrace, but James pulls away much faster than she would like.

"Rick's lungs aren't able to take in enough oxygen to sustain him much longer," she says when they part. She's using her nurse voice. "We've taken him off the ventilator because all of his organs are shutting down quickly. I just spoke with his doctor. It's only a matter of time now—maybe less than an hour." She stops to take a breath and tries to keep her composure. She, too, is emotionally invested in this patient, given how he is more like family than a family friend. Her voice softens. "Thanks for coming as soon as you could."

James only nods his head in acceptance, as he has no words for what is about to occur and he does not relish the thought of upheaving his reticent emotions. They make their way to the semi-private room where Rick lies dying. As they enter, the frail man lying on the bed opens his eyes and manages a slight smile. Kitty walks to the other side of the room and pulls the curtain for privacy. She adjusts the morphine drip and then puts her hand on his cheek.

"Hey, Uncle Rick. Jimmy is here. I'm going to give you two a few minutes of alone time, and then I'm coming back, okay?"

Rick raises his index finger as if to say okay. She looks at James and puts her hand on his back, and then she turns towards the door and quietly leaves. James pulls up a chair and huddles in close to Rick's bedside. Rick has no other family outside of the Milligans. His wife Margaret was barren and they decided not to pursue any other options for children. She died ten years earlier from ovarian cancer.

James rests his hand on Rick's left leg, and he can feel the bones underneath several layers of blankets and sheets. The dying man's eyes remain closed, but regardless, James speaks to him about his childhood memories of them together with his sister and his parents. He weaves in details about the Milligans' rural home, asking Rick if he recalls certain quirky stories about their family gatherings there. "Remember how Aaron used to play the harmonica and you the spoons, despite the fact that

neither of you knew how to play at all?"

James never referred to his father as anything other than Aaron, and nobody ever challenged him on that—not even Aaron himself.

"It didn't matter though," James continues. "You guys would bellow out songs for hours, and mom and Maggie used to beg you to stop because they were trying to crochet and watch their television show . . . What was it called again? God, I can't remember the name of it, but I do remember you both laughing so hard that Aaron would fall off his stool every time."

He pauses for a moment, trying to fight his emotions.

"I've always admired your friendship with Aaron. I looked up to you for being able to love him so much, despite his intolerance of others. You always managed to calm him down. It's just like how I was with Stephen. You and dad were kind of like the two of us boys. The ying and the yang." James feels an overwhelming need to cry but manages to hold it back.

Rick begins to cough momentarily and James instinctively moves closer to help him settle. His goal is to soothe the old man with his words, to sweep his soul of any fear that might trickle in.

"Rick, you're the luckiest man I know," James says lovingly. "Your life has had meaning and purpose. There was nothing you didn't do for the ones you loved and cared for. You never messed up, not even once. I've always envied that about you—how you mastered everything and treasured the time you spent working to perfect your relationships. You never wasted a moment."

Rick grunts and mumbles something that James cannot decipher. The old man's breathing slows, and from experience James is aware that death is about to enter the room. He squeezes Rick's hand tightly. "It's okay to let go. I'm here with you. I'm here, Uncle Rick. Thank you for looking out for me, and for not ever placing judgment on me."

Rick's mouth is wide open, but barely sucking in air. His hazed eyes open and look upward to the ceiling, and then suddenly roll back. One breath resists the force of exhalation. Ten seconds later, he labors for another. He struggles through the inhalation and resists the force of exhalation again. The thought comes to James that there are parallel patterns of breath during the birthing and dying processes.

Suddenly, the rattle of Rick's breath triggers the monitor, and it begins to hum loudly like a cicada. The sound brings the doctor rushing into the room with a nurse in tow. James rises from his chair and gives the medical staff space to do their jobs. After a few brief minutes, both the doctor and the nurse are resigned and give their condolences to James before he exits the room to find his sister.

Kitty is sitting at the desk with Rebecca, the nurse that has come in to replace her while she goes on maternity leave. Rebecca Doyle is a thirty-three-year-old single mother of an eight-year-old girl, Miesha. Rebecca is pretty, with a slight build, dark shoulder-length hair, and almond-shaped brown eyes. Her features are small and dainty, almost childlike. Rebecca may be petite, but her character is large, filled with gusto and determination. Today, however, these characteristics lie dormant while nerves take over.

Nurse Donna Braggen walks over with a stack of files and interrupts Kitty and Rebecca's conversation. She possesses the characteristics of a short and stocky bulldog and bears the couth of a laughing hyena. "Hey ladies, I hear The Shepherd is here today. Who died?"

"Donna! Mind yourself!" Kitty scolds, smacking her lightly on the hand.

Rebecca stands next to them, totally bewildered. Before Kitty can explain that Donna is referring to her brother James, Donna interjects, looking straight into Rebecca's eyes.

"James is her big brother. He's not bad on the eyes. Oh, you'll see. Anyway, he's a volunteer here and somehow is able to assist veterans through their passing. He just shows up and starts talking to them about anything—and then, poof! Lights out."

Kitty glares at her. "Honestly, Donna. You're talking about my brother, you know."

Donna ignores the rebuke. "I've had several conversations with patients who've witnessed his virtuous and calming effect by the deathbed." She marches over to the file cabinet and starts systematically putting away a pile of charts.

Rebecca seems impressed, and Kitty feels the need to further explain the situation to her. "Never mind her. Look, my brother is an introspective kind of person."

Donna pipes up again. "You mean emotionally handicapped."

"I mean—" Kitty snaps, "—he has insight into things that most people don't. He's a wealth of knowledge on all subjects, especially art and world travel, and sometimes he sits with the veterans and talks about these things because it gives them something positive to focus on. Besides, I actually think it helps *him* more than it helps the patients."

Donna totally ignores Kitty's comment. "I saw this story on the news a while back. It was about this cat that lived in a palliative care hospital, just like this one, and he could sense who was going to die next. He'd turn up at that person's door on the very same day."

"Donna, *please!*" Kitty demands.

Rebecca is somewhat disturbed and yet humored by this. The girls start to

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giggle when Rebecca is interrupted by James's obscure and unexpected presence. He is standing across from the reception desk, his eyes dull and void of expression. She and James look at each other for a few seconds with puzzlement until James cannot look any longer. Kitty sees her brother and struggles to rise from her chair to greet him. She looks into his eyes, where the emptiness says everything. She hugs him tightly. Tears start to stream down her face. Rick is gone.

Dr. Lewis approaches Kitty and James and they speak of the situation quietly. A pastor comes forward to join the conversation, and a minute later Kitty escorts him down the hall towards Rick's room. James slowly walks towards the elevator feeling drained of his unwanted emotions. A veteran named Gerry Robinson is walking past him towards Rick's room. He is a tall, thin man, balding at the crown, with shifty blue eyes. He putters by sporting a light blue housecoat with holes in the pockets and trolling an intravenous drip on a roller.

"Hello, Jimmy! You going back to the office now?"

James tries not to look him in the face. "Uh, yeah, Gerry, I am. Have a good day," he says, though most of the words catch under his breath.

Gerry's eyes follow him into the elevator. James knows that the old timer can sense that something isn't right.

"Okay, Jimmy, you too," Gerry says. "I'm off to see if Rick wants to watch the game with me tonight."

A quick wave goodbye is all that James can manage as he watches the elevator doors begin to close, separating him from the awkwardness of the situation.