

SAM DIFALCO

Pauly

PAULY WAS PUSHING ME. He'd been difficult all week. He hadn't been sleeping much—but that was no excuse. It wasn't my fault. I was there to help. His eyes were dark, hollowed out. He kept asking for ice water. It took him forever to drink some. His mother had cancelled her visit again, fourth week in a row.

I kept putting him on and off the commode. He had the runs. There was blood. He was white as a ghost. I told him he'd have to eat something, maybe a slice of bread and butter. He found this amusing. He laughed so hard tears were running down his bony cheeks. When he stopped laughing tears were still running down his cheeks.

He wanted to go to bed. He was exhausted, his breath coming in short gasps. I wheeled him into his bedroom, lifted him from his wheelchair and put him on his bed. I removed his pants, his socks, his underwear. He wanted to leave on his T-shirt. He asked for his ventilator. He rarely used it during the day. It was a point of honour with him. I switched on the television across from the bed and positioned his head so he could watch cartoons.

"Are you okay now?"

"My arm, move it up."

I moved the arm closest to me.

"The other arm."

"Okay."

"Push my feet down."

"Where down? Toward the foot of the bed, or the edge?"

"The edge. And my head, turn it a little."

"Up or down?"

"Up. And my foot, something's rubbing. No. The other foot."

"How's that?"

"My foot, it's still not right."

"Toward the edge?"

"No, no. Lower."

"Here?"

He fell silent. I watched him for a moment. His eyes became fixated on the flickering television.

I spent most of my down time in an anteroom off the kitchen that was furnished with a small bed and a television. A narrow window opened out to the street, yet the room felt airless. Surrounding buildings blocked all but the most vigorous breezes. The heat was kept high for Pauly's sake. I ate my ham and cheese sandwich. I'd forgotten mustard, it tasted bland. I wasn't going to borrow Pauly's. I drank some water. The television was off. I'd been trying not to watch it. I'd just get anxious when I watched too much television. It was louder and more aggressive than it used to be. There was no room for silence on television; no room for darkness. Sometimes that's all I wanted.

Often in the evenings I'd lie on the bed with the lights out and the door shut so I didn't have to hear Pauly's television buzzing in the background and his ventilator clicking and whirring. And no thought of sleeping. I'd never been able to sleep in that room. Even if I did nod off, Pauly was sure to call for me upon the half hour. Trying to sleep under those circumstances was pointless. No, I'd just lie there awake and not even think really. Just lie there in the quiet darkness.

Pauly rang. I waited a minute before heading out to him. It was only five o'clock and the sun was setting. I switched on a few lights.

"What is it, Pauly?"

"I have to use the commode."

"Again?"

He said nothing. He wouldn't ask to be put on the commode unless he needed to; he had a hard time getting comfortable on it. I sighed, went to the washroom, and got the commode. I picked Pauly up and put him into it, trying to balance his jutting tailbone on the cushion. I tightened the belt around his chest.

"Too tight," he said.

"How's that?"

"Too loose."

I didn't ask him how it was a second time. I adjusted his distended feet. His left foot had a purple sore on the instep. He'd had it for as long as I could remember. All manner of ointments and dressings had failed to help it heal.

"The belt's too tight."

"It's not."

"It is."

I loosened the belt slightly. Then I wheeled him into the washroom and set the commode over the toilet. I had to shove a shampoo bottle between his legs so that his penis would point into the toilet bowl in case he had to pee. Before I exited the washroom he started dribbling and splattering, his face locked in a pale grimace of both pain and relief. I shut the door and left him alone. I went into the kitchen and rinsed out a few cups and glasses, then I swept the floor.

"Okay," he said. "I'm done."

I returned to him and put on some latex gloves. I wiped him with toilet paper and flushed the blood-spattered toilet.

"There's a lot of blood, Pauly."

"I know. Fix my hand, it's numb. And brush my hair."

"Your hair's fine."

"No, look at the part."

I brushed his long hair. He hadn't had it cut or trimmed in over a year. It hung limply to his shoulderblades. I had got it down to nine strokes, three on each side and three down the middle. I didn't budge on that number unless I felt that I had messed up.

"It's—it's not right."

"It's fine, Pauly. Besides, you're going right back to bed, aren't you?"

"Look at the part. Just look at it."

I reluctantly gave him a few extra strokes. I realized that though he was vain in his way, he enjoyed the stimulation as much as anything. But I had to draw the line. He'd have me brush his hair for an hour if he could.

"It's still not right."

I wheeled him back to the bedroom and put him back in bed. I hooked up the ventilator and fixed his head so he could watch television.

"My ear," he said.

The ear was folded under the side of his head. I flattened it out. Then I pulled up his black-and-white striped comforter. He looked at me.

"What is it?"

"My leg."

"Okay?"

"The other leg."

I adjusted both his legs this time and he continued to complain, but what could I do? I knew he was in pain, I knew he couldn't stand to be in that wrecked body, but I could do nothing for him. All this futility. I tried to imagine a point to it all, but I couldn't. He had his Creator to blame for this, his mother, maybe no one.

I went to the anteroom. It was dark out now, but I didn't turn on the lamp. I stretched out on the bed. I was scheduled to be there until seven in the morning. Someone would relieve me at that time, I wasn't certain who. The faces kept changing. I had a few days off coming up and I needed a break badly. I was losing my identity. I was having trouble thinking clearly, when I could think at all. I wanted to climb into my own bed and sleep for a week. Pauly rang, but I didn't want to leave just yet. I had to think this through. I needed clarity. He rang again. I took a deep breath and stood up.

"What is it?"

"I need a drink of water. Put some ice in it."

I returned to the anteroom. I grabbed the pillow on the bed and thrashed it. Then I went to the kitchen and filled a tumbler with ice cubes and water. I got a drinking straw out of the cupboard. I wondered what he planned to eat that evening, or if he planned to eat at all. I'd try to coerce him to eat a bit of bread perhaps, or some soup. But if he wasn't hungry there wasn't much I could do.

"The water tastes funny."

"What do you mean?"

"It tastes soapy. It's the glass, the glass wasn't rinsed."

I went back to the kitchen, turned the tap on full. I braced my hands against the edge of the sink, squeezing until my knuckles whitened. I gave the glass a good rinse. You know, you fuck up a few times in this life, squander some choice opportunities, blow your good chances, and you suddenly find yourself doing some-

thing like this. Ostensibly it's worthy and rewarding work, but you pay a high price for it. Bits and pieces of yourself fall away gradually, are chipped away. You can lose yourself helping the other.

Pauly rang me again. I wasn't jumping. I tried to imagine myself elsewhere, in Sicily, riding a bicycle through the countryside, the poppies blazing around me. I'd been there once before. I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to go back. Pauly rang again. What else did I think of? Of running, of flying. All my thoughts were an escape, blundering, anxious. There was no place for logic, for abstractions. If I could fix on an image I felt lucky. A small bright memory. Pauly rang again. I got up.

"I have to go back on the commode," he said, his voice tremulous. "Hurry. I don't think I can hold it."

He couldn't. When I got back with the commode he'd already gone; and despite the blue padding beneath him, the bedsheets were completely soiled. My heart turned. I had to leave the bedroom, I thought I was going to pass out.

I staggered to the anteroom. I sat in the darkness with my head in my hands and tried to breathe deeply. I laughed to myself. I laughed because I knew it wasn't personal. It was like getting dealt a shitty hand in poker; maybe you think the universe is rigged against you, but really it's just the odds.

After a few minutes I returned to Pauly's bedroom to clean up the mess and wash him. I rolled up my sleeves and put on some latex gloves. I had to change all the bedding and scrub him with soap and water. His breathing was thick. I drained his vent tube and checked his inner canula. It was covered over with mucous. I got some Q-tips and some oxygen peroxide and cleaned it. The smell was disgusting. I put the bedding in garbage bags and sealed them. I went to the washroom, dumped the latex gloves in the trashcan. I washed my hands with antibacterial soap. I returned to Pauly. He asked to be suctioned even though he despised it. I unhooked the ventilator and peeled a wrapping off a catheter. I engaged the suction pump and jabbed the catheter into his inner canula. Pauly's eyes bulged and his tongue thrust white and slimy out of his mouth. Mucous gurgled through the suction tube and into the blue scum-tub. I stopped after four plunges; some blood was showing.

Pauly's face was tortured, his head nodding. "Get me some water," he said.

I brought him another glass of ice water but he could barely take any.

"My arm," he said.

I fixed his arm, pulled up his comforter and returned to the anteroom.

I opened the window. It was autumn out there; the air had a nice bite, leaves were rustling. People were going for long walks or eating dinner in their cosy homes. And they deserved that. They'd been dealt decent cards and had made the most of them. Not everyone had fucked up.

Pauly rang again and this time I thought, I can't do it, I just can't do it. Not now. I'm dying; this is killing me. I broke into a sweat, my legs were weak. I buried my face in my hands. I tried to clear my mind and breathe deeply. Pauly rang again. I continued to breathe deeply. After a few minutes it passed.

"I need some medication," he said.

He took a variety of pills, tablets, liquids, but there never seemed to be any rhyme or reason to it. It was his responsibility to tell me what medication and what dosage to give him.

"Get the morphine pills."

He'd only asked for morphine on four or five occasions, when he was at the limits of pain. He tended to avoid morphine; it wiped him out, bothered his stomach.

"How many?" I asked him. He usually took two.

"One at a time," he said.

I put a pill in his mouth and held the straw up to his lips. It took some doing for him to get some water down.

"Another," he said. His eyes stared blankly ahead.

Again I let him take some water.

"One more," he said.

Three seemed excessive, given his frail condition. I gave him the pill and he took more water.

I put the glass down on the nightstand.

"Another," he said.

I hesitated.

"Give me another one."

I looked at his expressionless face. I took a deep breath and gave him another pill.

Then he asked for another. And another.

There were about twenty pills in the phial. It seemed to take

forever. My legs were shaking. He stared straight ahead the whole time. His breathing slackened. I pulled the comforter up to his neck.

“Higher,” he said.

I pulled it up.

“Fix my ear.”

I did.

I returned to the kitchen and rinsed the glass. I shook the glass out and put it in the cupboard. I gave the counter a wipe with a damp cloth and straightened out some bottles in the spice rack. Then I went to the anteroom. It had gotten cold in there. I shut the window, closed the blinds, and took off my shoes. I switched off the light and sat on the edge of the bed for a minute. Then I stretched out on the bed, covered myself, and fell asleep.