

Button eyes and hard goodbyes  
Emily Sanders

The machines in the corner beeped steadily, securing their place in the dingy hospital lighting. Mint green curtains swished as the night and day nurses swapped: rubber heels clicking against the floor, pencils pressed feverishly to paper, gloomy light glaring off of the starched hospital bedsheets.

It was Monday.

Today the hospital seemed to screech, overburdened with the insanities of hundreds of nervous people, all clamboring for answers.

One floor up, newborns announced themselves with bright wails, drawing tears from the eyes of newly made parents. On the floor above that, bones were guided to their rightful sockets, skin was sewn back together, and blood was donated to the less fortunate.

People of all races held fast to hope, clinging to it like a life preserver as they waited.

The clocks in the hallway, the break room, the bathroom, ticked onward, pressing forward incessantly no matter how dire, hopeless, futile the circumstance.

Life. Moves. On.

*Or does it?*

Clarissa happened to be pondering that very same question, all the way in room 2B of floor six. Everyone else had left hours ago- wept soundlessly as they packed up their things and shuffled out the door, dragging their hearts behind them.

She picked at her nails, chewing the inside of her lip to a raw, bleeding sore. *Up* her brown eyes flicked, across to the lonely bed in the corner. Tucked away, forgotten, and yet...always remembered.

Atop it, a pale green rabbit with its head cocked, peering expectantly with clever button eyes.

She dug her nails into her palms, gritting her teeth with a bitter snarl.

*What are **you** looking at?*

She thought of muttering it, reciting it, of screaming it over the lifeless plush.

Of ripping the godforsaken thing to shreds, of letting it go up in flames.

She stood purposefully from the chair, aching with every movement; she'd been sitting in it all day, after all. It felt like she'd been sitting in it for months, from the moment of her brother's diagnosis...to his last handhold. Tears peppered in her lashes, collecting like melted snowflakes and racing down her cheeks.

Cancer doesn't care if you are tired.

How weary. How dumbstruck. How angry you are.

It just takes.

and takes.

and *takes*.

And goes back for seconds.

The scariest thing?

She could hardly remember it at all, had lost count; so buried beneath her rage, her heartbreak might as well have been lost beneath the earth, as dark and hollow as a catacomb.

She ran a sharp fingernail down the middle of her palm, hard enough to leave marks- an effort to stave off the tears. As if it could help; as if it could change anything at all.

Her heavy footsteps carried her to the bed, bracing her before the purest form of insolence, of denial.

Atop the bed, pressed up against the pillow, the plush rabbit wondered up at her.

She glowered at him spitefully. Sitting at his worn down feet, a golden dollar glinted slyly in the fluorescent lights.

*Mikey.*

Simple, bittersweet memories sighed down her cheeks, leaving her skin wet.

Her brother, the believer he'd been- was still waiting on the tooth fairy, wherever he was now.

Her eyes feel the rabbit- the same stupid rabbit he'd always insisted on taking with him: dragging him round to chemo, playing with him in the rain when he'd had the strength to stand in mudpuddles, reading books to the previously-fluffy thing.

Anger nestled in her bones, its warm flames licking through her veins.

She snatched up the love-worn creature, gripping it in her fist.

*“You.”*

It gazed back with gentle button eyes. Inanimate as it was, its nose seemed to twitch in the air, sensing danger under her blistering gaze. A tighter squeeze, and the rabbit slumped over her hand, fabric bowing before her audacious command.

*“You.*

*You stupid, awful little....”* she seethed. Instantly, a soft voice chimed in the back of her head.

*Awe, don't yell at him! What did he ever do to you, 'rissa?* Mikey sounded.

Clarissa blinked. No. *No.*

Furrowed her brows; willed them to submit to her.

And yet...her whole face seemed to pucker even then, as she contemplated the crumpled, somber rabbit in her hands. Once upright and lovely, now lifeless- all hope strangled out by a single, insurmountable force.

Like burnt paper.

Like wet sand.

Like a house of cards.

*Like Mikey.*

And suddenly, she could no longer see- only blindly blink as the world became fuzzy and unclear, the lop-eared best friend of her kid brother now the star of the hospital room.

Tears choked her voice, warping them to a gargle of wet and wrong and sorrow. An inferno of anger behind her eyes, jesting the tears.

“You- y-you had one *job*. You....you were supposed to take *care* of him-”

Slumped over in its new master’s grip, it seemed to pout, fabric wilting at the disappointment, venomous heartache laced expertly within her words. “- *to make him feel better.*”

She glanced at the bags of fluid that hung from their metal poles, waiting for a patient that would never return. Impossible guilt hung against her ribs, tapping them, barraging them hollow with regret.

“*to make him forget,*” she whispered.

And it felt good, like that. To release her vengeance upon the one thing left responsible- the fuzziest, doe-eyed, hope-filled thing left. To squeeze it all out until nothing was left but the cold, dead truth.

It all felt *really* good.

For about thirty seconds.

Clever button eyes rested against her, prodding a question.

Her lips quivered, trembled before the gentle creature- shaking until she could no longer force it down. A primal wail escaped her, dropping her to her knees. She hit hard, kneecaps smashing into the tile, tears pouring effortlessly down her cheeks.

It was a stuffed *animal*, for Pete's sake.

The most unclever, ordinarily boring as they come.

A silly, raggedy, worn-out rabbit, the color of seafoam. It had once been soft, bright, lovely, the day her brother had entered the world, greeting everyone with a loving wail of firstborn life- the cry of excitement for everything.

They were inseparable as shadows from light.

Both had tender blue eyes- one made of muscles, the other of buttons. Mikey had never minded; they were best friends, nearly brothers. They had explored the woods, clambered up the tallest trees in the backyard, built pillowforts, read ghost stories in the dark, and cuddled together at night, sleeping soundly beneath warm covers.

To a stuffed animal, being fuzzy, fluffy, charming was cute- but being well-loved was better.

The gradual matting down of fur, from one too many hugs. A lopsided ear, patched up and stitched together again from many a whispered secret. A gentle touch to brace against the harshness of the world. A steady hand to hold during treatments. A fur color to transport him to the waves that crested over the beach, far away in paradise; a trip around the world, when his boy could no longer stand.

Clarissa sobbed, releasing him from her grip.

The rabbit seemed to breathe again, relaxing gently against her scratched up skin.

She cradled him in her hands, tilting his head back so he was facing her- watching her with those soft blue buttons.

“I’m sorry-” she choked out, shaking her head frantically. “- so very sorry. You don’t deserve this, you don’t deserve it at all.” She brought him to her chest, gently stroking his soft, matted fur. A soothing, gentle texture, helping to smooth out her nerves.

“You were just doing your job. And you were doing your best....”

She pressed a kiss to his head. The rabbit seemed to tuck in, curling toward her as if to hug her, to comfort her greatly.

“I’m so sorry he couldn’t stay to play,” she cried, running her fingers over his soft fabric ears, tears *plop plop plopping* onto his head. The rabbit sighed lovingly.

*My work is not yet finished.*