

Tab 1

The Devil Between

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DX-CA

Yesterday, I came out transgender. This morning, I left my partner. Currently, I'm walking uphill towards the emergency room. It's hard work, but I manage not to cry.

"No, that can't be it," I try to assure myself. My stomach churns. I'm only five blocks away. Though, it feels like miles.

I walk faster. Trying to avoid people if I can, but it's the morning rush. The F train rumbles below. Screeching to an elongated stop.

I look back at the building. It's one of the many which sprouted up during covid. A line of patients protrudes. Blocking the entrance for the cafe next door.

"Fuck," I admit, "That really didn't go well."

I trip between pedestrians, walking the opposite direction. There's a vacant stoop in the shade. The edges are crumbling.

"Thank god," I curse.

As I approach the brownstone, the intersection reads "6th St and 6th Ave".

"Just one sixth away from the devil", I laugh.

Crows caw in the shadows. Ravens swoop and dive. A petal lands on my head as I sit.

"Ok." I panic. Trying to take in slow breaths. They come out rattled and brief.

On top, I observe the entire neighborhood. Large families stroll by. Dogs and children in tow. It smells of suntan lotion and hot coffee. Just another morning.

A minute passes by. My stomach growls. Even the thought makes me nauseous. My mind meanders. It gets stuck in the last half-hour.

I try to make sense of what I was just told. I can't. Not a single thought sticks in this storm. But, as I close my eyes, I begin to feel something.

The wind rolls in from the harbor. From Sunset Park up Greenwood Cemetery, to me. Whispering, soon, it'll be too hot. Every square inch of shade will be occupied.

I squint my eyes. Then, in a last ditch effort, look directly up. It doesn't work.

I try to hide my face. I'm flushed out. Red and running. A fox sprinting for the tree line. I tell myself everything will be alright. It has to be. I don't believe it for a second. It just seems like something you do in this situation. Like saying *sorry* at a funeral.

I pull out a joint. Roll it through my middle finger and thumb.

"Guess I probably shouldn't," I think while flicking the red lighter.

"After that ", I give in, "Fuck it."

I let out a large plume. Proceed to cough. Then, shake violently as I spit, and take another. Blowing rings that grow with distance. Zoning out as they do. Drifting back but a moment ago. Living now what I couldn't then.

I'm waiting in the clinic. It's small, packed, and quiet. Fluorescent lights flicker.

A nervousness permeates the air. It's oddly still and endearingly silent.

I hear my name. I head towards the nurse rapping her pen.

"James," she questions. Eyebrow raised.

"Unfortunately," I reply with a one-sided smirk.

"Come with me, sir" she guides.

I'm wearing a green dress.

"Actually," I pause, "I'm trans."

"Oh, ok," She turns.

I'm brought to a small room. It's damp, moldy, yet somehow sterile. Vague whiffs of alcohol haunt the air.

"Do you have any covid symptoms," she asks, pointing to the table.

"No," I lie, moving from the chair.

"Alright, what brings you in today", she looks at me.

"Just an ulcer," I point at my stomach. There's a bulge.

She looks confused.

"OK, why do you think it's an ulcer?" Her back has stiffened. Eyes look up from the computer.

"From the stress," I state. "You know, rent and all."

I tell her about the bullshit of my work as she inspects me. She's quick yet firm with her presses.

"Arms up, open your mouth, cough" she proceeds, "You have a slight fever. 101.1, sir"

"You don't have to call me Mam," I choke, "but you can't call me sir". This time I'm firm. "Please."

"Sorry", she says.

I try to continue talking. She pauses, so do I. There's a double double take. Then, presses turn to stabs.

"Wait here," she stammers.

A breeze follows her out the room. It smells of shampoo. Before I can process what happened, the doctor slides through the door.

He's a bit portly in a boyish way. Like he's still growing into his lab coat. He puts down his clip board upon seeing my wrinkled face.

"How are you?" the doctor asks.

"You got here pretty quick," I huff. "The waiting room was full on my way in."

"Ah, and it still is."

He motions for me to lay down. It's a gentle gesture. The tenderness is out of place.

"Alright sir, when--"

"Not a sir, mam," I break in.

"What," he smiles.

“She’s trans”, the nurse pipes.

Her mood has changed. Her movements are more bouncy. She keeps her eyes on me. I hone mine on her.

“Nice nails by the way,” I test.

I try to stay perfectly still. Each crinkle of paper cracks my confidence. Every crunch, a clinical catastrophe.

“I just came out. Like yesterday.” I look at the ceiling. The tiles here are out of alignment.

“Oh, congrats! How’s that going,” he’s looking at my abdomen, taking it in.

“Well, I’m here,” I half joke. “And I lost my job, but my dog doesn’t care.”

“Right, um I’m going to feel around a bit. Sounds good?” his hands hover ready.

“Crunch,” I nod.

More presses. His eyes widened. Mine slam shut.

Immediately, he withdraws his hand. I hear the snapping of gloves and the trash can. I slowly open my eyes—confused.

"That's it?" I demand.

There's the briefest pause. I register softness. It takes my breath, and dampens my fire.

"Well." He takes my hand and presses it on my abdomen.

"Do you feel that?" he asks.

"Feel what?" I ask, genuinely confused.

"Ah, ok. Feel that hard mass sticking out," he moves my hand around while watching me closely.

"Yeah, you mean my abs?" I ask slowly.

"Haa—" it slips out too quickly for him to catch.

"No, no, this isn't muscle. Feel," he presses my hand harder.

I whimper. Then go limp. He loosens his grip. I'm radiating.

"Abs don't hurt when you push on them" he enunciates every vowel.

"Got it," I spit between gasps.

"How did you walk in here?" he finally lets out. Striking a pose.

I'm here, but I'm not. Stuck in a half daze. Sitting in the chair, but also floating on the ceiling.

The doctor is in the corner. On that stupid round roly stool. He swivels from computer to paper several times over.

Finally, he settles with a pen. Furiously, his hand scribbles. The wheels slide with each stroke.

"I don't like doctors. Even the cute ones," I decide.

He starts talking again. I try to listen, but only catch bits and pieces. He mentions something about necrosis, bones, and blood. Like the ingredients in a spell.

"So we don't know what type." He looks up, "Not yet, and not here."

"Wait, what," I snap back, "You're saying I could die in a month or be fine?"

"I mean, you'll find out soon enough. Wait here one second" then he leaves.

I drink in the stillness. A keen ringing in the air. For the briefest moment, there's the absence of everything.

He comes crashing back with several doctors in tow. All of them are young. Large dark circles under their eyes mark them family.

“What, are you all on your lunch break,” I giggle.

“What are you,” one of them asks.

“What,” I yelp

“Your pronouns, are you a—”

They list off several. I roll my eyes, and sigh. Oblivious, they continue.

They each repeat the examination. Every doctor pushes in the exact same spot. Asking “does that hurt”.

I wince each time. Finally, I shoot up:

“I’m going to shit myself if you keep doing that.”

I toss myself back down. Thanking my feral side for strength. I nurture it. Expecting she’ll be needed soon.

The “What are you comment” is still seething. They’re all huddle together trading secrets. The portly doctor waddles towards me.

"It's huge!" a short doctor whispers to their peers.

"Thanks," I say sharply, "I grew it myself". It clearly hits, as he sinks behind the others.

The youngest doctor goes to speak, but mine stops him. Turning back to me, he says,

"I'm not going to lie. It's probably cancer."

The other doctors nod in *silent* agreement

"It can't be that bad if I walked in here," I demand.

"Let me rephrase," he continues, "it is cancer."

"We're going to call an ambulance," the third doctor says.

My head is floating. I look down. Eyes stretched. I shake left to right.

"Is there something wrong with that," the blonde doctor asks.

"I don't have insurance," I admit.

"Can you make it to Presbyterian?" my portly fellow asks.

"It's closer than my home is to here," I lie.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. I feel small under its weight. I try not to blush, and fail.

"You have to go right there. Directly to the hospital," he commands.

My doctor walks over to the counter. He grabs the note from the desk. Then hands it to me.

"Ok, what about today's fee," I shrug, he sighs.

"I don't normally do this", he admits

"Yeah, likewise." I return.

Then, we head to the front. I wave goodbye. Note pinned on my chest. Oblivion.

Directly between the clinic and hospital, I took this seat on the stoop. Smoked this joint before walking into the ER. For my health.

There's just one thing left to do. I pull out my phone.

"For Estelle," I steady myself. Then, dial from memory.

I wonder if she really blocked me. I half consider this as my heart flutters. My hands have been shaking all day.

My recents are deleted. I have to press each digit. The combination of past and present unlock my demons

Ring.

"Guess not," I sink.

The sun has broken through the haze. It's absolutely beautiful.

Ring

All I can think is that god isn't real. This is all just random.

Ring

I know for certain she hates me. There's a pause. It stretches for eons.

"Click ", an absence of dial tone.

"Hello," she says slowly as if I must be confused.

“Hey,” I try to say sweetly. “Sorry to call so soon, but do you think you could walk Estelle this afternoon? ”

Another pause. I can’t tell if she’s offended. Estelle much preferred curling up in her lap. Regardless, she says nothing. It takes a few seconds of silence before I break.

“I can pay you.” I offer softly.

“What are you talking about,” she snaps, “I’m supposed to be in a meeting.”

“Look.” I pant then stop.

Taking the moment. Holding the both of us. Savouring the last seconds.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“I don’t know what to do, but I have cancer,” I whisper,

“What?” she chokes.

“It’s fine—really. They just need to figure out what kind at the ER. It’ll probably take all day but it’s really not a big deal.” I try to convince myself.

There’s intelligible sounds in the speaker. Perhaps just static, but I swear I hear her catch her breath.

"I'll get you a cab and everything. It's worth knowing Estelles with you." I admit.

"Wait, why," she tersely retorts, "you don't need to pay me".

My voice crumbles. "I know," I croak, "but."

"I know," she interrupts softly, "I know".

All I can manage is "Thank you,". It is so quiet I don't think she hears me. We both stay hanging on the line. Wavering between two days ago and now.

"XXXX," she states.

"Yeah," I ask.

"Call your family"

"What?"

"This isn't for friends. This is a family matter."

"Liste—"

"Click"

I stand up from the stoop. Legs weak, I grab the railing to manage. Slowly rising up by the second.

“Whatever happens, I walked there”. I etch this talisman into the foundation of my being. Whatever happens next, whatever they call me, no-one can take away that I walked in.

I take the note from my pocket. Squeeze it. It’s nondescript. Just a piece of paper.

“Guarentee it starts with *He*—has no insurance,” it comes out as a hex.

“I am leaving partners, jobs, and family.” I continue, “What the fuck is happening”.

A few pigeons flap out of my way. Beneath my feet, leaves scurry. There’s a screeching sound as the G train grinds out the station.

I reconsider the hollowness I feel. Something isn't functioning how it should. That much is obvious.

I can't quite stomach anything. It comes up vile. I'm at the intersection.

I curse and spit. Then, close my eyes. I've arrived.

In my dream last night a voice kept repeating. Soft and gentle, it rang true. Only one topic to debate.

A maze of arrows guides around the block. There's another building with a long awning. Finally, sliding doors marked "H".

She whispered "it's alright to die. That's allowed. It's alright. Don't be afraid."

We're well off 7th Avenue, but it's still incredibly loud and busy. Nobody on the block is smiling. Everyone has slight panic in their eyes.

I told the voice, "No. I can't go. There's work to be done." Begrudgingly, it lands true.

Sirens dance in an echo chamber of steel. These high rises serve the community, but also reverberate its drama. Several more ambulances come and go before I walk in.

"Your choice," the voice had said.

I walk down the entrance hallway. Windows on either side. There's a guard sitting several feet up at the end. In a little wooden booth, he has to bend down to speak,

"What are you here for," he asks nonchalantly.

"Emergency room, please," I sputter out. Flashing the note.

He points to his right, I turn to my left. Then I see it. A line with no start.

I head over. Settling in for a long wait. There's a tap on my shoulder. I take my headphones off and turn.

"Note please," the nurse points.

I hand it over. She scans it quickly. Those in front have turned. Watching, curiously. Surely wondering.

The nurse doesn't let any hint escape. She is unflinching. A statue of stone.

"Alright," she says.

In one movement, she unclips a walkie-talkie swinging up. Her lips brush the speakers.

There's no telling what she's saying. So, I stare off.

To my right, there's a man from the local jail. He's clearly in pain but shackled nonetheless. He can't keep still.

Right in front of the nurses station, an elderly lady sits softly. There's an even older man beside her. I honestly can't tell which one they're here for. Maybe both? I remind myself this isn't funny.

"Take a seat please", the nurse guides with one hand.

There's a wheelchair. Then a quick prick. Now, I'm connected to a saline bag. There are white, red, and yellow bands around my wrist.

"To get you hydrated," she says.

"Oh, Ok," I question.

We take a series of sharp turns. There's a beep of an id badge, and double doors swing open.

I'm immediately hit with the humming of a well oiled machine. Clanky and old, but still dependable. How long has it been like this, I wonder.

Every corner smells different. Strong, pungent, foreign—but familiar in some way.

Promising misadventure as I sniff. We keep going. Further back.

As we pass through, I see people sprawled out on every available surface. Just a handful of patients, and their families, but it feels like a crowd. My chest hollows out.

“Don’t worry.” She says, “You’re getting your own room. ”

“Great,” I croak.

“You’re lucky we’re not too busy.” She informs me.

“Nobody wants to get sick on a holiday,” I laugh.

We round another corner. I see a stranger, about my age. He is being wheeled in the opposite direction. We catch each other for but a moment.

Finally, I’m wheeled into a narrow room. A short nurse with a buzz cut is waiting. At 10 feet long, the room is just wide enough for three adults, but not the wheel chair.

‘Alright, best of luck,” the nurse waves.

I manage to mouth an awkward thank you. There’s a heavy door sealing the entrance.

No sounds are drifting in. I doubt any can escape. It’s unnecessarily bright. I try to turn, but catch the I.V.

I haven't heard a word this nurse has said. I like her though. She makes me feel calm, and taken care of. You can tell she's naturally a healer. Moreover, a safe person. She sees me.

I never say I'm trans. She never asks, but seems to know. Sparing me for the full weight of cancer. She dives into her craft.

"Do you mind needles," she asks again.

"Not really," I proudly share.

This is the truth. I know there are far worse things here than needles.

"That's good,"

"Yeah, I can't imagine having cancer and caring," I kid.

Without missing a beat, she adds,

"Actually, we just had a patient who had a needle broken off in their arm. Yeah, they were a kid when it happened. Imagine. Oh, not here," she continues.

As she talks, she skillfully arranges plastic tubes. Putting specific labels on them. Asking me my name, age, and birth date. She triple checks each time before continuing.

"They had to get surgery to get it out. Now, they can't stand needles, which makes perfect sense," she shrugs, "Which arm?"

"I don't care," I admit.

Then, with decades of experience guiding her, she slides in an I.V. No pain, just a release. She found a thick vein. Noticeably deeper than the rest.

"We don't want it coming out," she glances through the corner of her eye. A slight grin. She tapes some type of tube to my arm.

I think about the warm liquid filling the tubes. It's blacker than I imagined. A ruby in the dark. Showing only its finest hues. No reflections—just deep reds once blue.

Tube after tube, she keeps going. Around the seventh, she stops.

"How much blood do I have?" I ask,

She laughs, "About five liters, How old are you by the way?"

"33," I mutter.

She places the tubes in a bag. Checking each one as she does. She looks relieved.

"So much of cancer has to do with age," she whispers looking at the wall.

"Is that good," I ask.

"For you it is", she states blankly.

"Ok, Do you think I'll get out of here in time to walk my dog? She's crossing her paws," I ask.

There's some stirring inside. It's unfamiliar. Like shaking up a snowglobe. Everything settles, but in different places.

"It's almost certainly some type of blood cancer," she points to the test results.

"We're not sure what type. What's important is making sure it hasn't spread to your bones, given how advanced the tumor is," she continues, " see your LDH? It's off the charts."

She points at some hieroglyphics.

"Jokes on you, " I think, "I cried the whole way here. Now, I have nothing left."

She grabs my hand, "You'll want to start calling family. Maybe think about wrapping up any unfinished business."

"What, when can I go home," I peep. "I have a meeting later and."

It's the only thing I care about.

"You're going to be here for a while," she interrupts.

"No I'm not," I reply, "I can't afford that." I protest. As if she could change these facts.

"You have cancer," she continues with more softness, "your only job now is getting better."

My eyes widened. Arms go numb. I've never made money by taking care of myself, I think.

"We'll run more tests, get you healthy for chemotherapy, and we'll start the regime. "

"Chemo," I pant.

"Chemos," she corrects, "You'll definitely be doing several types, but it'd kill you right now".

"I didn't even know there was more than one chemo," I confess

"Oh, no cancer in the family?" She says while filling out another form. "That's lucky."

"I guess. I mean, nobody I know in my family has had cancer. No grandparents, cousins, or even pets."

"Let's hope it's a good one," She says.

"A good one?" I rattle.

She looks pale, "Some blood cancers can be cured", "Others have less than 1 percent survival. So, yes, let's hope it's a good one."

I don't believe it for a second. As if she can read my face, the nurse calmly continues,

"Don't leave no matter what they tell you. They can't force you to leave, insurance or not, but if you leave, they won't let you back in."

"That's fucked up," I yelp.

The cancer diagnosis made more sense than this. My abdomen moves from within. I'm not the only one fighting here.

A few tests come back with amazing speed. She doesn't question why I hadn't noticed how sick the tests were saying I was. She knows.

The other doctors wouldn't even think to ask that. Oblivious that I was trying to kill myself. Subconsciously or not.

Before she goes, I get one more gift. I.V ativan, and suddenly things aren't so bad. I don't feel nauseous, and my demons float off.

I take a deep breath. I actually feel good, I think.

With an exhale, I pull out my phone. I dial my Mom from memory.

I deleted her number a few years ago. We've spoken once since then. This is completely my fault.

Regardless, she picks up. This is not to my surprise. Most people were having trouble with my no contact policy.

Last time we talked, I told her I called off my wedding. Because I wasn't straight. Baby steps.

Now, a season later, another change. In a twisted form of gratitude, I realize how much happier I am—it's me.