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The Room

By Jodi Paik

The room was often sunny. The nurses pulled the windows back as soon as the sun was out so he could see into the yard below. The nurses pulled him to the window and pointed down at the ground. The grass on the ground was limp from the morning fog. It looked like the kind of grass that squished when you stepped on it; it was muddy underneath. There were always a lot of people walking on the pavement down below. They moved quickly, in and out of different doors, holding cups of coffee or eating danishes. Sometimes they walked in larger groups together. From the far view, regardless of the size of the group, they all looked like they were scurrying. When he felt better he liked to squint out one eye and hold the people between his thumb and forefinger. He sometimes cackled and called them his ant army and that always made his mom laugh.

The room was usually quiet. He was alone in it save for his parents, and usually the nurses kept the door closed. When the heat went on you heard some clicks and shudders, and occasionally you could hear the low rush of a toilet next door. He didn't keep the TV on anymore because he had already seen all the movies that you could watch and so the air was very still. Every once in a while there was a whirr from the machine next to his bed as some gear turned over and was quiet again. In the room they had been in before, there had been a lot of noise — chirping alarms that let you know when you were breathing too fast or when the tubing had kinked, louder alarms to call the other nurses if something bad happened. This room was quiet enough that he could hear the *pound-pound-pound* of his heart when he lay on his ear. On the edge of sensibility he could hear a soft rhythmic sound that he thought was somebody crying. Lowered voices, the taps of the rounding doctors, stillness.

The room was mostly white. It was the kind of white that was made to seem clean regardless of how dirty it might get at any one time. The room was tiled; it did not have any carpet. This was a good thing, for many times the tile floor was covered (accidentally) with blood, or vomit. Spilled Jell-O from the late night snack tray. The room was white but when you looked up from your pillow, there were things on the ceiling. Someone had painted a butterfly and a kite. In another room, kitty-corner to this one, there was a rocket ship and a painting of the man on the moon (green). Some rooms had stars you could only see when the lights were off — he liked those rooms best. All the things you would find in the air were on the ceiling of the room. If he looked carefully he could see a face on the wall where all the tubes were plugged in; the spigots were eyes and the socket made for a nose, right in the center of things. The face was made of other things but it was still a face. The room was full of things that looked like things you knew but were different. It was supposed to make him comfortable but instead it felt strange.

There were lot of things he wanted to do but couldn't, although towards the end, when they knew his remaining time was short, they pretended they did not see. He wasn't supposed to play with the bed. He wasn't supposed to raise the head of it as high as it could go and the bottom as low so that it slanted like a slide. *It's not a toy.* He wasn't supposed to take the gloves in the wall and blow them up into balloons, although sometimes the doctors did, when they were trying to make him smile. He wasn't supposed to take the doctor's pen. He wasn't supposed to go into the hallway and ride the desk chair like a race car. *Stop what you're doing. You'll wake everyone else.* He wasn't supposed to steal all the Saltines and little containers of cranberry juice from the family kitchen and hoard them in his room for late-night snacks. *If you want something, just let us know and we can get it for you. But the rest of these are for everyone to share.* He wasn't supposed to eat after midnight because there was going to be another test (he was so tired at this point — he didn't want to eat anyhow, and there was always another test). The window of the room only opened as wide as his forearm so that nobody would fall out. He didn't understand why you would worry about falling out of a window, but he kept his distance from it even so, just as they asked. He wasn't supposed to play with the drapes. *They are for opening and closing only.* He only wanted them open anyhow. This was going to be his last little room and he wanted to see the world outside.

They had lots of things to make him feel better. They had lots of art on the walls, pictures from famous storybooks that his mother had read to him, bright and colorful abstracts with funny titles, like *A Swan Car in Summer.* They had a train in a case in the clinic foyer with a lot of red buttons that you could push and listen for train noises and watch tracks switch back and forth. One of the buttons turned on a little stoplight and he loved to watch it go from green to red and back again. They had a nice college girl with bright red hair who came and read him stories once a week. She read him *Dr. Doolittle* and he loved the animals most of all, the talking monkey Chee-Chee and the Pushme-pullyou. They had sundaes on Wednesdays, if your doctor said you could eat real food. The doctors wore bow ties or regular ties with cartoons on them. He didn't see many bow ties except in pictures from his parents' wedding and he thought they looked a little funny. He wanted to reach up to spin them but thought that might be rude. He wasn't sure if they spun anyhow.

They had lots of stickers, and you could choose one after they finished a test. He put them on his shirt, and then his gown when he stopped wearing the shirt, and then on his mother when he stopped wearing the gown and instead lay down on the bed in only his underwear. Sometimes he felt really hot and was glad that the room was so cold. Sometimes he felt very cold, but they had a special machine that warmed the blankets, and you could get one tucked in around you if you were too cold or too sad. There was a little red button on the controller that attached to his bed that you could press and then ask the nurse for one. His dad was always joking about the button. *I need one of these at home!*

They had a little stuffed monkey who was also sick. The monkey had been sick for a while too and he had to have the same things happen, and he always had them first. The monkey had to put his arm out for a shot. The monkey had a piece of blue tubing stretched around his arm and tied with a bow. The monkey had to lie on the table on his side while the doctor stuck a needle into his back (he patted the monkey's head to calm him down). The monkey lay next to

him as they were wheeled into the room, and the monkey got a mask and breathed deep and counted backwards from ten, just like he did. He sometimes wondered if the monkey got far; he never remembered counting down past the number seven.

First statistics were in his favor. At first his prognosis was good. *In these situations nearly three-quarters will still be living in three years.* He took the medicine every three weeks, and it made him sick — so sick that he didn't want even Grandpa's bread and his mom had to stop wearing *L'air du Temps* because it made him nauseous. He had a hole made in his chest where a tube came out and that was where they put the medicine. *With the catheter, we can put in larger doses without it harming his veins.* Three times a week his mom pulled off the clear sticker that covered the hole and cleaned it and put a new one on. Jack called him the Bionic Brother and said it proved he was secretly an alien requiring special nourishment from the home planet. He liked it when Jack teased him that way. It felt like the way things used to feel.

Sometimes he was really sick and he had to go in a special room that had two doors. You went into one door and then you washed your hands and you went into the next. In that second room there was a bed where he slept. You were supposed to wear a mask over your face but people didn't always. In the special room all the doors had big glass windows so people could look in and he could look out. He liked looking out the windows. Everyone was rushing to or from somewhere. There were lots of trees outside. He watched as the leaves on those trees turned colors and then fell, along with some branches, during the first winter storm. He loved to pick up twigs. Everywhere he walked, down Miller Avenue *(the maples on the corner),* up Main Street toward the church *(gingkos that dropped their berries in the spring).* Now he sat in the chair propped up with pillows and watched the trees drop their leaves and the people — *his ant army* (they all called it that now) — go back and forth, pushed by the growing winter wind.

He had been sick for a long time. He had been sick for so long he could barely remember otherwise. He forgot what it was like to be well. He forgot how it felt to be out in the yard with the other kids, playing *Toilet Tag* or *Freeze Tag,* chasing one after the other. He forgot what it felt like to run, to run so fast that when he stopped his cheeks would be red and his heart would beat like the heart of a bird. He forgot how it felt when you walked barefoot across the pavement to the park on the other side of the street - how hot the asphalt was, and how bumpy. He forgot the prickles from his mother's roses. He forgot what it was like to throw a ball, or catch one. He forgot how to play HORSE. He forgot what it was like to sit on a bike. They used to go up to the lake in the summer. The cabin there had a big circular driveway and he learned to ride a two-wheeler there, chasing Jack, who was a better pedaler. When they were home, Jack called him annoying names and stole his Halloween candy and put signs on his door that said *Little Brothers Keep Out,* but up at the lake they played a lot. They played Clue (he liked to be Colonel Mustard) and Pictionary and long games of Monopoly. He forgot what it was like to hang out with Jack then, in the days before when Jack sometimes hated him, not like now when Jack always looked sad.

The room had a chair in it that turned into a bed where his mom could sleep when she stayed the night. It had a sink that turned on by pressing on a pedal with your foot. It had a television that hung from the ceiling and lights you could switch on that made it as bright as anything in

the world, even in the middle of the night. It had spigots in the walls that sent out different kinds of air. It had the bed with the controls, and another bed just outside that sat on wheels and could be pulled like a wagon in and out of the room. The room had its own bathroom (he didn't have that at home) and there was a cord in the bathroom you could pull if you needed to speak to someone. He didn't know what you would say if you needed to speak to someone in the bathroom.

The room was full of paper pumpkins at Halloween and cut snowflakes when Christmas came. The room was full of cards from all the people he knew and some that he didn't, letters from his cousins and grandparents, and notes from his classmates. *We miss you Todd!! Come back soon!!!* The room was full of pictures his mom had brought of all the things he loved and places he had been. The room was full of lots of equipment. He liked the sound of that word — *equipment.* Some of the *equipment* was brand new; it came with manuals of all sorts, and some of it was wrapped in plastic when it arrived — he got to see them open it for the first time there on the spot. Some of the *equipment* was old; it looked like a computer that belonged on the *S.S. Enterprise,* a ship he knew because his dad watched it late at night, when the rest of the world was sleeping. He knew a lot now about those late-night hours. Sometimes he woke and watched the big black hands on the clock click their way slowly to 3AM. At that hour of night it was hard to fall back asleep, so he stayed awake, his hand in his father's large one.

In the beginning, the room was a good and safe place to talk about what might happen next. They talked about how it would be when he felt better, what they would be doing next Christmas, next birthday, at the beginning of next summer. In the beginning, they were always looking ahead. He was going to have a Mickey Mouse cake and six friends overnight. He would get to try out for Little League, and they would watch him play in every game, his dad promised. He would even get a new glove. Before school started, they were going to camp in the backyard for practice, and then they would go camping by his uncle's house, in the mountains. There was a stream behind that house where you could see elk if you were still at dusk. They were going to camp at Uncle Jim's, and then in the morning they would cook pancakes by the fire and make their own slingshots. He was going to play *Cowboys and Indians* with Jack and their cousins; he was going to be the sheriff and he was going to *whip Jack's butt.* That was how it was at that time in his life. He wanted nothing more than to beat Jack at something.

No matter the time of day, regardless of what was happening inside, even at the very end, if you took a look outside through the glass, the ant army was moving. It was always moving (sometimes there were only a few people and sometimes whole throngs, but always, always moving). Long after he had fallen asleep for the last time, it would still be moving. Years later, it would be a family talisman. Looking down from the John Hancock (celebrating their 50th, or Jack's engagement, or much later, at a grandson's graduation), or watching the city from a plane heading up into the clouds. Someone would look down and say, *There's Todd's army!* And then they would all smile, and go silent, and think of the way that some things are lost, and that some things go on.

Jodi Paik lives in a small town on the coast of California. She was “trained” as a writer (an English/Creative Writing major at Stanford; an MFA in Fiction from Columbia) with a brief, late (uncompleted, due to her own health issues) foray into medical school. She writes, "The little boy in this story appeared to me one evening, nearly fully-formed. While there is plenty of cancer and even some sick children in my family, Todd is based on no one I know in my actual life. However, I could imagine this child in his large white hospital room, and I knew that his was a story I needed to tell."