

Meg Larson

All Monkeys, All the Time

for John Hart

There's a dead guy in the trauma room and no one knows his name. I'm at the head of the stretcher with Macon the cop. It's twelve minutes into my shift in the Emergency Room. We stare into the face, two purple black mounds where eyes should be.

"Nailed by a pickup on the access road," Macon says to me. "Serious biker. Bike was carbon fiber. Shoes clipped to the pedals." Macon makes a pedaling motion with his fat fists. Already he grates on my nerves, throwing his hands around and dropping words like bricks from his lips. Cops generally annoy me, especially loud ones. They remind me of my ex, who was both a cop and obnoxious.

I keep quiet, wait for Macon to leave or get another call while I feign extraordinary interest in the blood-encrusted scalp. Macon takes my silence as encouragement, pulls the sheet up to the dead guy's knees, points to the shoe still on the foot. Across the velcro strap the logo reads LOOK LOOK.

"Shoes clipped into the pedals," he repeats, in case I missed it the first time. He shakes his head, dejected. "No wallet. No money. No picture ID. But Power Bars galore." He swings his arm, like he is backhanding the world: "Fucking Power Bars all over the road."

#

After Macon leaves, I dump saline on the dead guy's hair, rub at it with a towel. I need a few hours sleep or some caffeine, intravenously. Day shift is not my thing, although I occasionally fill in. I usually work the suicide shift, 3 p.m. to 3 a.m., the twelve busiest hours of the ER day. I can do this because I have no kids, no pets, and at the moment, no significant other. I do have an ex who fancies himself a stalker, but he is no more effective at that than he was at being a faithful husband.

So the beauty of this oddball shift is that I get to choose my room assignment. No one wants to work the trauma room as often as I do. Even die-hard adrenalin junkies have a limit. Because

trauma patients are all I want, because I prefer blood and guts over sick people any day, because I've done this for eight years now without burning out, management considers me a godsend. At least they used to. Now they watch me, like I'm a gorilla at the zoo. Who knows when the gorilla will get pissed and pound on the glass? Maybe I don't look so mean, but they're scared all the same.

Fitz, my partner in the Trauma Hall, comes in to watch me work. He has wild hair that belies his lazy nature.

"Who's the stiff?" he asks as he drops to a stool on wheels, uses his legs to pull himself around the room. He can be quite active when there's no real work involved.

"Name him and claim him." I douse another towel with saline and grind it against the skull.

"Oh, one of those." Fitz plays the counter like a drum, then slides across the room to peer at the dead guy. He clicks his tongue a few times and skitters back to the counter, saying, "That's a face only Mama could love."

"Fitz, that's not a face. It's a freaking mess. Here." I toss him a clean towel. "Make yourself useful and help me get the blood off him before Mama shows up and wants a look at her Sonny Boy."

"No way. Not me." He throws the towel back and gives a body-long shiver. "I can't stand the sight of blood."

#

In the usual course of events I don't have time to clean up dead bodies; I send them dripping to the morgue. It's uncommonly quiet for a Sunday in general and Race Week in particular when every redneck with a sixpack and a folding chair winds up at the nearby Motor Speedway.

I barely get the blood out of the dead guy's hair before the charge nurse sends me to help out Wickley, who's assigned to the Pit, the horseshoe shaped area full of sick people. Wickley is positively gothic with her purple lips and powdered white face. She claims blue-black is her natural hair color.

"Migraine, belly pain, nutcase, addict," she says.

"Which one should I start with?"

"That is one patient. The Quiet Room. All yours."

In the Quiet Room, the usual repository for psych patients, a skinny boy with a stud in his nose crouches on his pillow. He looks all of fourteen with hair dyed banana yellow and two mismatched earrings hanging from one ear. He peers at me through fingers covered in homemade tattoos.

"I know you," he says. "You're my monkey's uncle."

"Right-o."

"You don't have to lie to me," he pouts.

"I don't have to. I choose to."

"Okay then." He stands on the bed and kicks a foot in my general direction, follows it up with a long armed slapping motion.

I call for security.

Wickley hoots.

#

Wickley has been on her pious high horse since she wrote me up after she caught me pocketing a Vistaril from the med room. I tried to explain that it was only an antihistamine, and I even showed her the rash on my neck. Naturally there were things I had to endure: the on-the-spot piss test, the week-long suspension followed by a day full of interviews where I sat trying not to sweat in my grey wool slacks and long-sleeved white blouse, which were entirely too hot but very professional looking. I tried to look appropriately apologetic, not pissed or hell bent on revenge, which was what I was at the moment. I knew for a fact that Wickley confiscated every half empty bottle of penicillin in the department to take home for her mangey-ass barn cats.

Lucky for me, my family physician sent a letter to the board of investigators stating that he'd prescribed the Vistaril after I developed a rash on a weekend trek in the woods and the only thing he felt I was guilty of was poor judgment in not calling him for a refill when my prescription ran out. Privately the panel said they realized ER employees helped themselves to more than just antihistamines, and while I wasn't caught stealing controlled substances, like narcotics, I was stealing, all the same, and, therefore, I was to be an example.

Rather than ruin my career, they graciously allowed me to retain my position, albeit restricted for a month, thou shalt give no medications, and officially wrote me up for Inappropriate Administration of Medication, rather than the dreaded Inappropriate Allocation of Medication, which is synonymous with Nurse, Feed Thy Drug Habit. My manager went to great lengths to explain all this at the monthly department meeting while I sat in the back of the conference room and pretended not to notice that no one would look me in the eye, except Fitz, who gave a lazy grin, and Wickley, who smirked with purple lips and bone-white teeth. After that I zoned out, replaying the last screaming match with my ex, slowing down the action so the entire ten-second trot of his naked girlfriend across my bedroom into the bathroom lasted nearly an hour.

I babysit young Monkey Boy, wait for the psych reps to show up. He is tied to the bed and occasionally belches. He doesn't say a word until it's time to go. "I got a banana for you." He chatters like a chimp until one hippie-looking escort squeezes his arm. He cries when they cart him off.

The dead guy is still in my trauma room, still ugly and bloody. No one's called to claim him. No one's called to ask about accidents, not one panicked wife, not one fearful mother. He could be from some dinky burg thirty miles away. They may not miss him for hours. How does that work, I wonder, if nobody knows you're gone, are you really dead?

I drag out the saline and start scrubbing. Generally I don't like to be around dead bodies. Sometimes when people die I can feel their spirits flitting around the room. Sometimes I think those spirits can read my mind, and they know dead bodies upset me with all the spitting and dripping and the mottled skin no horror movie can ever reproduce. Call me spooky but it's true.

To my relief the cyclist seems peaceful enough. I don't detect any frantic behavior from his spirit, in spite of the fact that I think his broken teeth look ghastly, in spite of the fact I don't know who the hell he is. Somewhere right now some girl who loves him may be sipping seltzer water as she drives home from her aerobics class. She may be checking their mailbox, inspecting the phone bill, and admiring the sight of his name.

Macon the cop is back. He eats a Power Bar while I shove the dead guy off to the side and slide a wheeled partition into place. I should've sent him to the morgue. Nobody's told me to do that yet but I could have. Macon watches me work then tells me of a pending arrival, my first drunken Bubba from the Race Track.

Bubbas One and Two, he says, showing me two fat fingers as he launches into his story: Bubba One sits on top of his truck with Bubba Two. They are on lawn chairs on the roof of the cab, half-dressed and mostly drunk, an empty Styrofoam cooler between them. Bubba One decides to go on a beer run, neglects to inform Bubba Two. By third gear, Bubba Two has rolled off the cab onto his pointy little head.

When Bubba Two gets to my trauma room, he is strapped on a backboard, his head immobilized by velcro and a few hard plastic blocks. He has a cervical collar around his neck and his arms tucked tight at his side. He is nearly naked and as hairy as an ape. His sneakers are scruffy.

A couple of medics hold the backboard so he can puke to the side without choking to death. They are discussing their last patient who had stuffed a banana, unpeeled, up his butt. I want to hear that story, but Bubba Two is trying to ask me questions amidst all the retching.

"Why does my head hurt?"

"You were in an accident," I tell him. He looks quite shocked.

"Was I driving?"

"Nope."

He barfs into a trash can at my feet. The room smells like a brewery. The medics look bored. The conversation about the banana is over and I missed it.

"Was anyone else hurt?" Bubba Two asks.

"No. Just you."

I tell Bubba Two we need to get his stomach settled but I don't give details on what I need to do. Namely, shove a tube up his nose, down the back of his throat, and into his stomach. I intend to suck out all that beer so he'll quit puking and stinking up my trauma room.

He chokes and groans and gags around the tube. He tries to kick his legs free then gives a good long yell that sounds like "Quit."

When the suction is on full blast and his mouth cleared of vomit, he asks a question.

"Why does my head hurt?"

"You were in an accident."

He gasps as if he didn't just hear this information two minutes ago.

The medics drop his backboard flat onto the stretcher. They walk out, leaving Bubba Two staring up at the ceiling. I hang another bag of IV fluid and search for the source of all the dried blood on his ankle. I take off his shoe and change falls out. He has a ten dollar bill stuffed up in the toe.

"Was I driving?"

"No."

"Was anybody else hurt?"

"No. And guess what. You get to stay in this fine establishment for at least one night which means you'll miss the big race tomorrow. Your guy might win but you won't be there." I'm enjoying this now. NASCAR has never impressed me.

Bubba Two stares into the light over his head.

"You still with me?" I ask because you never know. His eyes are the color of lager. He blinks.

"Why does my head hurt?" he asks again.

That's how I know he has a head injury and is not just stupid drunk. Aside from asking the same questions repeatedly, if he were only drunk, he'd be irate about missing the race. The cheap seats go for over a hundred bucks. Not to mention his share of the glory should his team win. And don't forget the wrecks. Dodging flying parts can be fun.

"Whatever happened to Bubba One?" I ask Macon who is happy for the attention and swings his arms. I see a Power Bar sticking out of his pocket.

"Picked up outside the FoodLion. Had a case of Bud." He makes a tipping motion with his hand, as if he's drinking.

"Glug. Glug."

Dad calls the charge nurse looking for me. He thinks this is like Wal-mart and all I have to do is pick up a courtesy phone.

When Bubba Two goes for a CAT scan, I call Dad back from the phone in the trauma room.

Wickley waltzes by with her big pale ears open. "Better not be personal business."

"You on break?" I ask to let her know that I know she has no business in my trauma hall. She should be out in the Pit, wiping the spit from the lips of the gagging masses.

"You busy?" my father says right off and I can tell he's in a good mood. Usually if I call him, he's cranked because I tore him away from the boob tube. "You busy?" he asks again.

"Kinda. Sorta. What's wrong?"

"Oh, you know." He chuckles, talks inaudibly to my mother. "Your mama's pressure is up and we hope you can stop by and check it tonight." He snickers, puts a hand over the receiver.

"Sure. No problem. Is Mama sick?" No doubt she ate shrimp again or country-fried steak. She refuses to stick to her diet then comes crying to me when she feels bad. I tell her to skip the fast-food meals but she is deaf on that subject.

"Oh, you know. On the couch. Got an ice pack on the head."

Dad laughs, more muffled conversation.

"Is everything okay? Is someone there?" I'm ready to hang up and be done with him. He laughs some more.

"There's this monkey. And it's riding a bike. And it's got a ball cap on and it's toting flowers." He consults my mother again. "This here other monkey's wearing this foo-foo frock and making kissy lips. Big fat lips. You should see it."

"What are you talking about, Dad?"

"Oh, you know. The monkey channel. All monkeys, all the time." He snickers.

"You're talking about TV?" No surprise there.

"Well, yeah. You should see it. It'll be on tonight when you come by. Wait, wait. Now they're getting married. This monkey bride, she's all dressed up and strutting down the aisle. It's funny." He pauses.

I don't know what to say. I fail to see the wonder of it.

"You gotta see this. All night and day. It's all monkeys. Monkeys doing people things."

He says this like it is a miracle.

"Why are you so worked up about a monkey channel on TV?" I ask, just as Wickley goes by in the opposite direction. She smacks her lilly white fist on the open door.

"Sounds like a personal phone call to me."

I think if the dead guy were alive, he'd be rolling his eyes, too.

#

"He's still here?" Fitz sighs when I recruit him for clean-up duty.

"Quit whining and help me scrub him up so I can send him to the morgue."

"So send him already. He was DOA. We're not responsible for graveyard detail." Fitz rolls a few strands of his hair between two fingers. He stares at the nostril filled with old blood, the cracked and crusted lips that I can't bear to touch.

"Well, show a little courtesy." I say. Fitz is not as stupid as he looks. Or as carefree as he pretends. "If he were your husband, would you like to see him looking like that?"

Fitz sticks his lip out. "He's too young to be my husband."

"Look. Help me out. I was married to a cop. He could've been killed by any nutcase with a gun. I had good reason to think about what it would be to identify his body. This guy was riding a bike. Do you think his wife or his girlfriend or whoever actually thought that would kill him? Do you think they'll actually be able to recognize him now? He's a mangled mess. He should at least be a clean mangled mess."

"All right. Just shut up. You're breaking my heart." He grabs a jug of saline and a fresh towel. "I'll do his face since that upsets you so much. You work on his legs. Then he's out of here and I don't want to hear anymore about it."

We work quietly for a bit.

"What do you think his name is?" Fitz asks.

"Greg. Maybe Randy." The blood flakes stubbornly in the hair of his legs. I scrub until I hit white skin, make the patch grow.

"Blonde wife, you think? Skinny?"

"Probably. But short, petite. She'll sit there in a chair and talk to him and hold his hand but she won't cry until she gets outside in the ladies room. And she'll spend the next six months beating herself up because she wasn't there when he died."

"Christ, you sound like some cheesy show on TV. I'm gonna start snotting if you don't hush now." He gives a few fake snuffles. "Hurry up with them legs. And take those goofy shoes off. You're supposed to die with your boots on, not some elf shoes."

"Clips into the pedals," I say with a gruff voice and make a pedaling motion with my hands.

Fitz gives me a black look.

My face goes pink. "Never mind. That's just my Macon the cop imitation."

I grab the velcro strip that says LOOK LOOK and loosen the shoe then peel off the sock. Inside his sock, stuck to the bottom of his foot, is a driver's license and a hand-written scrap titled Emergency Info.

"Bingo. We have a winner," I tell Fitz before trotting off to the nurses' station where Macon sits skinning the label from another Power Bar. I don't know who to hand the license to first, Macon or the charge nurse. I grab an envelope, drop in the license and emergency sheet. I haven't read either one. I don't want to be around when they say his name. I don't want to see Macon dash off to break the news to the wife or mother or whomever he had listed. I don't want to escort grieving family members to and fro, call preachers and taxis. That's what will happen. Now that we have a name, the dead guy won't be sent to the morgue at all. He'll stay in my trauma room, and drunken Bubba Two will go to Fitz when he gets back from Radiology.

"Hey, Macon, I got a love note for you."

"Really?" he asks with a fat hopeful face. He would look like that for any female who called him by name.

For a moment I almost tell the truth. Then I drop the envelope into his greedy paws.

“Yeah, just don’t read it now. Wait five minutes. I’m shy.” I feel positively evil as I walk away.

In the Quiet Room, the same psych kid is back, once again in four-point restraints. I poke my head in the room. He sees me and starts screeching “baboon, baboon, baboon.” He’s so loud it’s embarrassing.

“Looks like somebody’s been watching too much of the monkey channel.” I say as I wander off toward the Pit, looking for Wickley, hoping for a chance to harass her.