Surrenderance

By Megan Allred

There are probably fifteen or twenty of us in line, having passed the previous screening steps. I don’t care to count them. Some seem terrified, some elated. Most seem to display the same grim serenity that I feel. A calm acceptance, if not exactly a happy one.

‘Next!’ the woman at the window calls. A tall man steps forward and takes the stack of forms she hands to him. He begins filling them out with one of the pens in the cup on the counter. The pens are wrapped with green tape and have a fake flower stuck to the top, to make the pen cup look like a vase. Perhaps an effort to cheer the atmosphere, but it just looks tacky.

‘Next,’ I hear again. I realize that it’s my turn, and step to the window, where the short woman hands me a bundle of papers neatly clipped together. I take one of the flower pens.

‘Initial each of these lines here, confirming your organ donor status and acknowledging that you have completed the screenings and received your requested last meal to the best of our abilities. The next page is for any final wishes, which will be carried out, as long as they are within reason and not beyond the allotted budget.’ She shows me where to sign and turns the pages briskly. Her job is a strange one, but she treats it like another day at the office, doing routine paperwork. I guess it is routine, for her.

She turns to the last page and points with a purple acrylic fingernail. ‘A person of your choosing will receive this sum of money after the procedure. Please specify their name, address, and other information here- it doesn’t have to be your next of kin. It’s a combination of your life insurance policy, and the calculated amount of resources saved as a result of your Surrenderance,’ she explains, pointing to more lines on the page. I write Sarah’s information down carefully, wanting to ensure no mistakes. She will be taken care of, even if she doesn’t understand my decision. I write her work phone number in the margin, to make absolutely sure they find her.

‘Okay, all done with these,’ the clerk says, flipping through my forms one last time to double check. ‘Have a seat, and they’ll call you back soon.’ She smiles politely behind her horn-rimmed glasses and turns around to make copies of the forms. I walk to the other side of the room and sit down in one of the cushy teal chairs against the wall. I wonder if everything in this room was meticulously chosen with its use and circumstances in mind, or if it was just another waiting room.

Every step of this process has involved a different waiting room. In the beginning, they were almost excessively cheery, as if bright colors and bold prints would be so encouraging that all the visitors would magically forget how miserable we were. Sometimes there were magazines or pamphlets, or inspirational posters on the walls. There have been a couple with televisions that played a video on a continuous loop, about the Surrenderance program. A woman in a pastel pantsuit with a stiff smile talked about the program’s history, how it was initially highly controversial but a combination of evidence, arguments, and problems caused by overpopulation eventually won the politicians over. Statistics showing the program’s success and benefits were shown in brightly colored charts; the pantsuit woman sympathetically listed the screenings and precautions taken, and ways in which participants are given the utmost comfort and respect.

Sarah came to the first few screenings with me, half to be supportive and half out of hope that they would be able to find some miracle cure to fix me and change my mind. She would sit next to me and squeeze my hand with both of hers, anxiously bouncing her legs. After a couple of times, it was too hard for her to hear the doctors discussing the next steps with me, so she would stay in the waiting room until I was done. When it became clear that I was committed to this, she stopped coming. The more interviews I attended, the more drab the waiting rooms became, as if they knew better than to put such effort into cheering up a lost cause. This one has the vibe of a 1990s office building on a budget.

I suddenly remember the waiting room of my childhood doctor’s office, walls printed with cartoon zoo animals and little child-sized handprints. My mother would always read me one of the books they kept in the wooden lion-shaped bin, while we waited. Sometimes we would look together at the enormous fish tank, coming up with names for the fish, admiring the pirate themed decorations.

Mother. I miss her so much. I wonder, for the thousandth time, what she would think of all this. She would understand, I think. Wouldn’t want me to hurt. Maybe the Christians are right about the afterlife, and I’ll see her again soon. That’s what she would tell me, if she were here. Despite our conflicting beliefs, she had always been my biggest cheerleader, my best friend. She genuinely wanted the best for me, just wanted me to be happy. Yet another way I failed her.

The door opens. A stocky man in green scrubs appears, holding a clipboard. He calls my name, looking around. I stand up. ‘We’re ready for you,’ he says, holding the door open for me. I follow him through, heart racing. We walk down a short hallway with a shiny white floor, and he stops outside an open office door.

‘This is Doctor Riley, he’ll be doing your final interview,’ he says, gesturing into the office with the clipboard. I sigh. I have already done so many interviews and assessments, what’s one more? I trudge into Dr. Riley’s office and sit in one of the metal folding chairs facing his desk. The walls are hung with Asian-themed decorations- folding fans, tapestries with snarling dragons, watercolor paintings of cherry blossoms. He turns from his computer to face me, a warm smile on his round face. He’s balding a little, but has long, dark hair pulled into a ponytail.

‘Good afternoon. You seem anxious, so I’ll make this quick, I promise,’ he assures me. He has a soft, kind voice. This must be their last hurrah, hail-Mary interview, to make sure there are no doubts. He flips through the forms I’ve filled out.

‘Can you tell me why you’ve chosen the Surrenderance program, please?’ he asks, studying my face. This should be an easy question, after answering it so many times, but I don’t think he wants to hear the clinical terms and mental health history like the other interviewing doctors did. He wants to know why I want to leave this world.

I inhale deeply, trying to put words to the overwhelming, crushing tidal wave of emotions that have been drowning me for so many years. I have never been good at it. Perhaps if I was, I would have made more progress in therapy.

‘I guess… there are a lot of reasons,’ I begin, my voice cracking a little. ‘For one, the world is shit. People kill each other all the time over who believes what, over who gets to control what, over who people choose to sleep with or what they look like. It’s insane.’ I let out a breath and clench my fists, nails digging into my palms. ‘The less fortunate spend their lives trying to make things better, but the world has made it so that we can’t. And I guess it’s just that I’ve never felt like I fit. Humanity, this selfish world, it just isn’t worth it and I never have been able to find a place where everything feels okay, or a way to come to terms with the fact that this is just it. I could never relate to the religious stuff, or the afterlife, or find a reason for my existence and why it has to be so fucking miserable.’

I feel something drip onto my hand and realize I am crying. My nose is running and the outline of Dr. Riley across from me is blurred. It has been a long time since I put forth the effort of explaining all of this to anyone. Most of my energy has gone towards acting normal. People know how I feel, but that doesn’t mean they want to see it or hear about it. I don’t want to be a burden. That’s part of it, too, but I don’t tell him that. He nods sympathetically, encouragingly. I feel a familiar frustration at my inability to properly express myself; all the worthless words I’m saying never seem to do justice to the feelings. It never sounds right.

‘I’m tired of being like this. I’ve always felt like an outsider, never found my place in the world, never felt worth anything. I have tried everything and I don’t care enough to try anymore. What’s the point, really? All I want is to be done, I’ve given it my best for years and I think that’s enough,’ I finish, tired and angry. I lean back in the chair. Dr. Riley hands me a tissue and I wipe my face with it. He writes something on a notepad.

‘What about the good, beautiful things?’ he asks, studying my face. ‘The world isn’t all bad. Aren’t you a little sad you’ll miss out?’

I sigh. It’s been a while since someone tried to make that point, but it’s still a popular one. I tried that approach as a teenager. It resulted in desperately clawing for any opportunity to squeeze even the briefest moment of happiness out of life, mostly in unhealthy ways that had left me feeling emptier than before.

‘Honestly? No. The bad has outweighed the good for me for a long time now,’ I tell him, crossing my legs and pushing my hair out of my face. ‘Even the good things feel… pointless. Momentary distractions from the doomed reality. They’re nice while they last, but they’re rare and fleeting, and as soon as they end- because they ALWAYS end- all the bad is ready to pour back in.’

‘What about Sarah?’ he asks softly.

What about Sarah, indeed. She knows. She hates it, but she knows, and almost understands. She has watched me drown in it for years. She knew what I was when she chose to be with me. ‘I love you,’ she had said this morning, soft hands on my cheeks, tears streaming down hers, soaking into her long hair. ‘I know you need this, but I’m going to miss you so much.’ She kisses me and we hold each other for a long time, but not quite long enough. She is all I will miss, all that has kept me going for this long. Not enough, I think with a pang of deep sadness, to keep me going anymore. I think I have always known it was unrealistic to lean so hard on one person. She shouldn’t have to bear that weight.

‘She will be okay,’ I answer simply, and it’s true. It will hurt, but she’ll be alright. She has had time to accept this. My answers seem sufficient for him; he nods and pulls a paper out of his desk.

Death comes with copious amounts of paperwork, it seems.

‘Has anyone gone over the methods with you?’ I lean forward to look at the form. Lethal injection, overdose, hung by the neck, firing squad, the list goes on. They really have thought of everything, though I can’t imagine why someone would choose most of them. There’s even a line marked ‘Other’ at the bottom, in case your chosen method isn’t listed. Within reason, of course. Luckily I’ve put years of thought into this. Finally, the end.

There is a blank section on the back titled ‘Last Words,’ but I don’t need it. Never been very good with words.

‘Hypothermia, please,’ I tell him, checking the appropriate box.

He nods and signs the form, stapling it to the rest of them that I’d filled out earlier. ‘I’ve heard it’s a peaceful way to go. We have a room especially designed for it. There’s a soft bed, and extreme climate control that lowers the temperature to -27 degrees Celsius in a span of just a few minutes. The quick drop in temperature makes for minimal suffering. You’ll feel comfortably warm in the end, like drifting off to sleep.’

I smile. ‘I know, I’ve researched,’ I tell him, but it’s still nice to hear the information out loud from a medical professional. He stands and offers his hand; I shake it. He looks sad, disheartened maybe. His job must be difficult. Maybe he once thought he could change people’s minds and convince them that their lives were worth living, but that likely doesn’t happen to the ones who have already completed all the other steps and passed the screenings. We’re pretty solid on our decision.

‘It’s been a pleasure,’ Dr. Riley says, grasping my hand with both of his. ‘I am sorry that life has failed you, and I wish you a quick, pleasant death.’ He smiles sadly and escorts me to the door. The man in the green scrubs from earlier is waiting in the hall.

‘We’ll be just in this room at the end of the hall, here,’ the man says, walking briskly and gesturing to a door a few yards away. I feel strangely light, almost giddy. Like the jittery anticipation just before reaching a long-awaited goal. He opens the heavy metal door to reveal a small room. There is a bed in the corner, a full-sized mattress on a simple metal frame, and the walls are painted with beautiful landscapes- waterfalls, autumn trees. Once again, I wonder if the people who designed this room knew what its purpose would be. I sit on the bed cross-legged.

‘I’ll be in the next room. Press this button when you’re ready for the temperature drop,’ he explains, showing me a small red button on the wall next to the bed. He is all business, like the clerk in the waiting room. I nod, and he gives me a polite smile, exiting the room and closing the door behind him.

I curl up on the bed and instinctively reach for a blanket. There isn’t one- of course there isn’t one. I laugh out loud at myself and relax, pulling the photo of Sarah that I brought out of my jeans pocket. She gave me so much comfort in life, it seems only right that her smiling face be carried with me into the sweet embrace of death.

I reach up and press the button.