
FICTION | SPRING 2023

This Other Person

By Krista Puttler

“Ms. Paul, I can’t give you any more pain medication, it isn’t time.”

Edith’s eyes were closed. She was in the single patient room again, the one that had an anteroom with an extra sink that connected to her room by a sliding glass door. The residents always made sure both sets of sliding doors were closed before talking about her.

“Ms. Paul?”

Edith opened her eyes. The nurse stood at the foot of her bed. The only battle Edith had won this admission was the overhead lights. They were to remain off unless her doctor specifically asked to turn them on for an examination. Edith had lost the additional stipulation for that examination; her doctor refused to examine her alone in the room, citing the hospital’s stand-by policy.

“Ms. Paul?” the nurse said again.

“Yes?”

“Would you like me to call your doctor to see if you can get an extra one-time dose?”

“Ha!” This would be her ninth “one-time” dose during this nurse’s twelve-hour shift. “No, I’ll just sit here in misery. That’s fun for you guys, right? To watch patients in misery?”

“Oh, no, Ma’am.” The nurse took a step towards Edith’s covered leg, put her hand out as if to pat it over the blanket, stopped, then tucked her hair behind her ears. “We want you to get better, that is always our goal.”

“Why do I have to get better?”

The nurse opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“Well,” Edith replied closing her eyes, “It will just be a resident anyway, my doctor is in surgery. Please go away, I’ll be fine.”

The door slid closed with a click. Edith opened her eyes. A tiny rainbow danced in the sunlight on the far wall. Edith sat up and looked behind her, but she could not see what was making the reflection.

“Ms. Paul, is it ok if I come in? I’m going to turn on the lights.”

Edith sat up and smoothed down the hair on the back of her head. “Dr. Glass, you know you can call me Edie.”

The lights switched on.

“Did Rachel give you the extra pain medication? I’m going to remove that drain they placed down in the ER.”

Dr. Glass stood in green scrubs with a surgical bouffant hat pulled over his ears. He put on purple, latex-free gloves. Another woman in scrubs stepped into the room.

“Ms. Paul,” Dr. Glass said, “This is Dr. Wood. She is a surgical resident.”

“Hello,” the woman said and held out her hand.

“Did you use hand sanitizer first?”

Dr. Glass chuckled, then faced the resident. “Ms. Paul has had several post-operative infections. She is a little...”

"From your residents!" Edith interrupted. "If I had never let that one take out my staples..."

"Now, Edith," Dr. Glass said, stepping closer to her bed, "We don't know where that infection came from."

"From this hospital! I was doing fine until I had one little spot of drainage on my bra. Then suddenly, the tissue expanders had to be removed and I had to go into surgery three more times! I have never had so much pain in my life! Except for three days ago. If I ever see that ER doctor again..."

"Edith." Dr. Glass sat down at the foot of her bed. "I am sorry about how, um, the ER handled your most recent infection."

"You think it's my fault." Edith pulled her knees up to her chest and leaned back against the headboard. "You think I'm hurting myself to get more pain medication."

"Edith," he said, hands clasped in front of him as if pleading to a god he knew would not listen, "I do not think it is your fault."

Edith looked at the far wall. There was no rainbow. "Go ahead." Edith closed her eyes. "Let's get this over with."

"Knock, knock."

Edith lifted her eyelids a crack.

It was the same dream. She had been lying on a raft surrounded by smooth, green lily pads. She dipped her fingers through the surface. Cool water leaked into her veins, climbed up her arms, and spread over her shoulders. It had almost reached her scars.

"Ms. Paul?"

Edith opened her eyes. The room was grey, early morning.

"Dr. Glass wanted me to check your dressing one last time before we discharge you."

It was the resident from the day before. The one who got splattered when the drain was removed. In the end, Dr. Glass had taken it out. Edith knew the resident was disappointed about that.

"Dr. Wood, isn't it?" Edith sat up. "Usually, Dr. Glass has another person in the room when he examines me, don't you want one as well?"

Dr. Wood shifted her weight to her other foot. "You don't need to undress; I just need to see the dressing under your arm. I can look through the sleeve."

"That will hurt more," Edith said as she opened her hospital gown, "Don't worry, I won't sue you."

Identical horizontal scars bisected Edith's chest. The skin above the scars was mottled, a color darker than if she had been tanned, burned from the radiation treatments. The skin below the scars was tinged purple, green, and yellow, a fading bruise. Edith lifted her left arm. The square of gauze was saturated with drainage.

"I'll need to change that dressing," Dr. Wood said.

Edith rested against the headboard and closed her eyes. She should have jumped into the water and not woken up.

"Ms. Paul, here's your discharge paperwork."

Edith did not want to open her eyes.

"Ms. Paul?"

Edith opened her eyes. Rachel stood in the anteroom, just on the other side of the sliding glass doors. Perhaps she thought Edith had something catching. Edith stood up and walked over to the nurse.

“Please sign here, Ms. Paul.”

Edith looked at the black line at the bottom of the page. Her signature was supposed to mean she understood what went on during her hospital stay. Just above the line were the list of her final diagnoses: post-operative wound infection, recurrent; and chronic pain syndrome.

She looked up at Rachel, but there were no answers in her averted eyes.

When did having pain from a surgery, then having pain from a complication, then having pain during an emergency drainage because the ER physician did not numb her up become the diagnosis of chronic pain syndrome?

Edith sighed, then signed the form.

“Do you need me to call anyone to drive you home?”

Edith shook her head.

“Ms. Paul, can I help you with anything?”

Dr. Wood sat at a computer console at the nurse’s station. She seemed tired, but eager. Perhaps she had just helped a patient.

Edith shook her head.

Dr. Wood nodded, then ducked behind the computer screen. Her face glowed in the reflected light, like the surface of a pool lit from beneath.

On the wall behind Dr. Wood was a poster of a sink with running water and two soapy hands clasped within the basin. Beneath the sink was written: *Before examining you, please ask your health care team if they have washed their hands.*

“Dr. Wood?”

“Yes, Ms. Paul?” She looked like someone who believed if she only took the time to learn everything, she would finally have all the answers.

“Thank you for washing your hands.”

“Did you just get out of the hospital?”

“Down, Bowser!” Edith hollered, then turned to her neighbor. “Yes. I’m sorry for bringing him over on such short notice the other day.”

“Oh, he’s a doll!”

“Well, I usually try and get him into the kennel but...”

“It was an emergency! You were in so much pain, Edith!” Katie rubbed the dog’s back. “I know having cancer can be difficult...”

“I don’t have cancer.”

“But the radiation treatments?”

“I had pre-cancer. I was supposed not need anything else if I had the double mastectomies. But, lucky me, there were still some cells left.”

“Oh,” Katie nodded, “Well, it was good that they caught it early, right?”

“Sure. I just live with the consequences.”

“That’s right!” Katie gave a thumbs up. “You’re living!”

Edith opened her apartment door. Bowser streaked inside.

“Bowser, stop!”

He tugged Edith across the room, the leash still around her wrist.

“Bowser! Calm down.”

He jumped up and licked her neck.

“Stop!” Edith pushed the dog away and pulled out the front of her shirt. “You’re going to get my site infected!” The bandage was tinged red. Her arm jerked up; the leash caught underneath her hospital wristband.

“Bowser, I just need to...”

He pranced around Edith’s legs.

“Hold on.” Edith stepped out of the leash, pulled off the wristband, and set it on her glass bookshelf. Bowser placed his front paws on the shelves, his nose inches from the plastic band. Edith freed her arm from the leash. The dog lunged forward and grabbed the wristband. The bookshelf swayed.

“Bowser! Get away...!”

Edith lay on her back, pinned down by the bookshelf. She pushed *Infinite Jest* off her neck, its spine cracked down the middle.

“Ha! Ah...”

A shelf pressed into her chest.

Her pulse pounded in her ears; she could not take in a deep breath. Edith placed both hands on the shelf and pushed. It did not move.

There was a metal jangling, then a lapping sound. Edith turned her head to the left. Bowser looked up; his tongue flopped over his bottom teeth. A pulse of warmth trickled down her side and Bowser ducked to the ground again.

A searing pain clenched her skin, her muscles, her ribs. It was worse than any of her surgeries. It was worse than the ER, when the doctor told her they could not wait for anesthetic, that she would not feel anything anyway because of her scar tissue. And it must have been the infection, it must have gone to her head, because Edith had believed her. The scalpel had pierced the skin that was ropey and dark, burned but not burned enough. Edith had felt everything.

But this pain was worse.

“Bowser.”

The lapping stopped.

“Bowser!”

He looked up and tilted his head to the left.

“Good, ah, boy. Get...Mama’s...phone!”

His nails clicked on the linoleum.

Edith shook her right leg, still worked. Edith shook her left leg, still worked. She took in a breath. The left side of her chest did not fill with air as if it was plugged up from the inside.

The jangling returned. Bowser plopped the phone next to her shoulder then moved down to her side. The lapping resumed.

Edith closed her eyes. She could see the water, the smooth lily pads. She touched the water with her fingertips. It flowed into her palms, followed the veins across her wrists, and seeped into the crook of her elbows. She was finally going to do it. She pushed her shoulders back, ready to take a deep breath.

Edith opened her eyes and gasped. She reached across her body and grabbed her phone.

“Ma’am!”

The EMT rubbed his knuckles on Edith’s chest. The ambulance bounced; the monitors blared. Edith’s breath came in sips.

“Ma’am! I need to put a needle in your chest!”

Edith opened her eyes.

The skin between his eyebrows pinched together. There were tiny flecks of red on his mask, like someone had put a thumb over a hose of blood.

“I can’t give you any pain medication,” he said behind the mask. “Your blood pressure is too low.”

Edith nodded and closed her eyes.

“Is this your first Alpha trauma?”

Dr. Wood looked up. Her chief resident stood in front of the ER bay doors. The only skin visible on the chief resident’s body was between her eyebrows and the tops of her cheeks, and this was covered with a clear plastic face shield.

Dr. Wood fastened her shield over her own surgical mask and nodded.

“What rotation did you finish?”

“I finished Plastic Surgery this morning.”

“Ah,” her chief resident replied, “The beautiful and the...”

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The bay doors slid open; the emergency algorithm posters rustled on the walls.

“...in the trenches now!”

A gurney rushed down the ambulance bay.

“Trauma Two!”

Edith floated on her back, dangling her fingers over the side of the raft.

The gurney bumped up the ramp. In the transition from cement to linoleum flooring, one of the wheels slipped. Edith jostled to her side. The needle in her chest bumped against the gurney railing.

“She’s caught!” Dr. Wood said.

The gurney stopped; they rolled Edith back. The needle dislodged from her chest.

Edith opened her eyes. A girl placed the palm of Edith’s hand gently through the surface of the water. The water rolled over Edith’s skin like a wave knows its shoreline.

“One. Two. Three!”

The team transferred Edith to the trauma table.

“IV. O2. Monitors,” the chief resident ordered. “Sally, cut off her clothes.”

Dr. Wood started cutting up the front of Edith’s right pant leg.

“HR 130,” the EMT at the head of the bed recited, “BP Ninety-palp. SpO2 85%.”

“I thought she had a needle?” the chief resident asked as she grabbed Dr. Wood’s shears. She tore open Edith’s shirt.

“She did.” The EMT held up the catheter.

“Knife!” the chief resident called.

“I know this woman,” Dr. Wood said.

The chief resident paused, the scalpel inches from Edith’s scarred chest.

“She’s a chronic pain patient. I discharged her this morning.”

“No pulse!” the EMT said from the head of the bed.

The girl smiled at Edith. She cupped the water up and over Edith's shoulders. "Does it hurt?" the girl asked.

"Should we start CPR?" the EMT asked.

"Shouldn't you numb her up first?" Dr. Wood said.

"It doesn't matter," the chief resident replied, "If she feels something that means she's still alive."

Her scalpel sliced into the knotted flesh.

Edith flipped off the raft. She could not see the girl anywhere. She took a deep breath and dove under the surface.

"Clamp!"

She felt for the rib, inserted the clamp, then pushed into the empty space.

"Chest tube!"

The water entered Edith's nose and mouth. If she didn't cry out, she knew she would not hurt anymore. And if she stayed under the water just a bit longer, she would have time to search for the girl. Maybe this girl would finally be the one to erase all her scars.

Somewhere above the surface, an alarm was beeping.

Krista Puttler studied fiction writing at Northwestern University and is working on her first book, a memoir of her last year on active duty in the US Navy as the Ship's Surgeon on a deployed aircraft carrier. Her writing has appeared in the Journal of the American College of Surgeons, Ruminate Magazine Readers Write, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize from As You Were: The Military Review, and Collateral. She lives and surfs in Norfolk, VA with her husband and three daughters.