

# ARE YOU WITH ME?

## Are You With Me?

by Nate Zachar

Hospitals are a strange mixture of hope and lack thereof. You go through the halls and you see people who've gotten good news, then the next minute you see people who aren't so lucky. You see patients sleeping in their beds with breathing tubes over their mouths or you see them sitting up, watching a TV screen with tired eyes and a blank, bored expression. You see people hugging and people crying. You never know what kind of tears you're seeing.

I yawned, trying to put on a green dressing gown at seven in the morning. I was supposed to put my arms in the front, and let it hang open at the back. It's hard to tie a knot from behind, though. Maybe you were supposed to tie it *before* you put it on, then slip into it like that. I was too tired to think it out, though. I am not a morning person.

Mom was in the waiting room. She woke up two hours before me so she could do her hair before she left. She never went anywhere before her hair was finished. She'd poof it up with a tall blue bottle, the spray hissing on and off for a solid 30 minutes before it was right. It was a bright red color, a perfect circular shape. Big. Like a fireball around her head. Her hair was something of a running joke between me and my sister, growing up. We'd say it looked like a tumbleweed. Something rolling through Chernobyl on a windy day. Like Mufasa's mane. She wouldn't step outside if it even *looked* like it might rain. The idea of wearing a hat was a blasphemy.

Mom couldn't hide the worry on her face during the drive to the hospital. I insisted she

didn't need to come, but I needed a driver after the surgery. I needed somebody to sign for me and all that. Single and with most of my friends out of town, she insisted she'd come. I could see her concerned expression through the rearview mirror, even in the 6am darkness. Her eyes darted across the road. Her hands were clamped over the wheel. Jerky swerves and sharp turns were everywhere. I closed my eyes and unsuccessfully tried to take a nap, the potent smell of hairspray tingling my nostrils. The surgery wasn't going to be a big deal, as I told her; it was a routine procedure. But Mom was always the one who brought up the scary what-ifs: *don't climb up there, Dan, you could fall down and crack you head open and get brain damage—don't stand too close to the microwave, Dan, radiation can kill you, you know—don't go on a jet ski, Dan, I knew a woman who rode one once and it blew out her colon. Blew it right out.*

When I finally figured out how to put on that Rubik's Cube of a gown, a nurse walked in. She had tired bags beneath her eyes. She explained she'd have to shave me on my stomach, my pelvis and my right leg. She lubed me up with some kind of gelatinous substance, like the stuff they put on you for an ultrasound. I was too exhausted and nervous for it to be even remotely erotic. A razor buzzed over my stomach. She sniffled as hair fell off in clumps. Her eyes were red. I wondered if she had a cold, or if she'd been crying.

I looked like a Ken doll when she was done. My stomach and my pelvis and my right thigh were completely hairless. It was a jarring

image because I had Sasquatch-levels of body hair. Maybe not *that* bad, but I could grow a full beard in five days, give or take. If I went on a trip and forgot to bring my razor with me, I'd look like Samson when I came back (minus all the strength; though, I can do a mean set of pull-ups).

With my eerily-waxed body ready to go, she popped in the IV and started pumping the saline. She plucked the bulging vein on my left arm with a needle and blood trickled to my elbow. I watched it run down my skin like I used to watch raindrops run down the window during a stormy drive.

Eventually the surgeon burst through the door with the confidence and the barrel chest of the Kool-Aid Man and told me I was going to be fine. He said things like "rock 'n roll" and he called me "boss." He said surgery would be starting soon, that I'd be just fine and I'd make a quick recovery afterward. He told me he was going into the operating room to get ready and that we were going to "knock this one out of the park." I wasn't really sure what that meant, and the forceful undertone made me cringe—I pictured my unconscious body being jerked around and elastic, like a bull-rider's—but I smiled and said yeah. He said "see you on the other side" and gave me a fist bump on his way out.

The anesthesiologist walked in shortly after. So many people were popping in to see me. I felt like a celebrity for a moment. A brief taste of fame for a few hours. I was basically the Rebecca Black of the hospital.

I started to wake up when I looked at her. She must've been in her low thirties, with the kindest and brightest eyes. Even tired-looking, they were still radiant; the color of a summer ocean's sparkle. I breathed in her faint trail of perfume and she told me she'd be the one administering the Propofol.

I tried to smile as I told her, "No, I don't have any metal implants; no, I don't think I'm allergic to anesthetics," while hoping my breath didn't smell.

Her long dark hair fell elegantly over her shoulders when she turned to the screen that monitored my heart. I wondered if she noticed that it had spiked as soon as she walked into the room. Focused on the screen, she said, "Your heart rate's a little high." I told her I was just nervous. She smiled and told me I'd be okay.

Then she went to leave the room. I thanked her. I told her it was nice to meet her and said goodbye. She told me, with a laugh, that I wasn't done with her yet; that she'd be in the operating room with me. She'd be giving me the anesthetic and she'd be monitoring my heart and my breathing while I'd be out. I smiled. It was a comforting thought.

I used to believe in guardian angels. My mom would tell me there's one for everybody, watching over each of us. Each one was assigned to keep us out of harm's way. Whenever we survived a close brush with death—a car accident, a fire, a Double Down from KFC—your guardian angel was the one to thank for that. My mom even thought they had names: human names. She thought if you prayed hard enough, eventually the name of your angel would come to you. One day she walked into the living room, while I was playing a video game. I was distracted by two-dimensional Mario hopping on Yoshi's back and Yoshi *oom-ooming* apples from trees with his long tongue on my Super Nintendo, when she asked me,

"Do you want to know her name?"

"Whose name?"

"Your angel's."

I continued to play the game, but then I was aware of the shape of her hair to my left, her crossed arms, standing against the wall. "It's a *her*?"

"Mmhmm."





I watched Mario head butt a mushroom and become a man before I mumbled, “Okay.”

“It’s Lara.”

All I remember thinking was, *that’s a pretty name*. Mom walked out after that and left me to stare at the game, though I’d stopped playing. The name kept running through my head. I just watched Mario stand idly in a grassy field, and the timer counting down at the top of the screen.

I remember the warming sense of comfort that my belief in guardian angels used to give me. The woman with the bright eyes and the long hair gave me a similar feeling. I felt at ease knowing she’d be there with me during the operation. Soon enough, she returned to give me the initial injection. From there, an internal timer began to count down in my head, like the one in the Mario game. I was wheeled by her and a guy with a beard and one of those surgical hairnets, and the bright white halls and the passersby were already blurring and smearing right in front of me, like everything suddenly became paint and an invisible hand was dragging its fingernails over the canvas. The injection was having a *Project X*-styled party in my veins. My eyes rolled back in my head. Sounds became tinny and they echoed and faded, and each blink lasted longer than the one before it and the next minute I was in the operating room.

There was machinery everywhere. Large metal structures and monitors and people with lime-green uniforms and surgical masks covering their mouths. The amount of activity was overwhelming, dizzying, a lot to take in. A lot to see while barely being able to see. Two people stood on each side of me. One person jiggled my IV from my left while a person to my right grabbed my shoulder and told me I needed to roll onto a different table. I rolled like a bag of leaves and my heart boomed and I felt a bone in my chest cracking with each raspy inhalation, and then I saw her. The woman with the bright eyes was looking down at me and she told me to just breathe, that she was going to start the medicine and to just breathe, it would all be okay. Count to five.

Just breathe.

Deep breath. Looking into her eyes. So bright, warm. Splashing waterfalls. Icy blue. A spring in the middle of Eden. I counted to two and I lost track. I opened my mouth to speak and my voice came out wobbly and drunk:

“You look like a mermaid.”

Somebody laughed, to my right. They said something about the anesthetic being “good stuff, eh?” But I had the same thought before I had it. She smiled.

“Maybe we—” I knew what I was trying to say, but suddenly each word was like a slug worming its way up my throat—“maybe we could go swimming together, sometime.”

Deep breath. She looked about to respond. Then it all went black.

I woke up in pain, in the recovery room. But the surgeon told me that it went well. Very well. He said it was bigger than he thought, but it’s all okay now and there was no blood loss at all and I’d make a full recovery.

I wanted to tell him that it wasn’t “very well”—I never found out what she said. I never even learned her name. Briefly I considered asking him what it was. But my brain was still half-asleep and it couldn’t assemble the question properly. Drool trickled to my chin, and my chin kept falling to my chest. He laughed and kept saying,

“Are you with me, Dan?”

I wonder what her name was. During the drive home, I swore I still saw the shade of her eyes flashing before me when I blinked, like the afterimage of a comet. Maybe it was Lara. 🐙

**Nate Zachar** stays up late writing things. He likes strong coffee and stormy days.

Artwork by **Hannah Perry**, a Brooklyn based freelance illustrator, a graduate of Pratt Institute and co-founder of the all female art collective, Fem Foundry.