

“Order of Care”

Ryan Hernan

George places his hand on the window in front of him, first just his fingertips, then his whole hand, sliding his palm up the cold glass until it covers her completely. He moves it away, and he sees her lying there. Sleeping, still. The thin white sheets neatly tucked around her body, obscuring all the tubes that lie beneath. She wasn't always that peaceful when she slept. Before, he would wake up to an elbow in the ribs, nearly pushed off the bed by her sprawling limbs, his side of the blanket mysteriously curled up around her. He misses that.

“George.”

He turns around to greet her father, who wears a grim look on his face. Carl is a father-in-law built to scare off prospective suitors, a big man, well over six feed, in his late sixties though he easily looks a decade younger. He always prided himself on staying fit, on maintaining his appearance. He is dignified, strong, the cornerstone of a family. Over the last few months, however, those decades that he had fought off for so long finally seemed to catch up to him. He looks thinner, and his slouch brings him down to George's height. His face, once stoic but never far away from a hearty smile, is now marked by a constant frown. He bears the look of a man in pain, and his eyes give away what he would never admit, to George or his wife or to anybody. That he is afraid.

“Best to come along now. Almost time for them to wake her, and... well, best to stay out of their way, I suppose.”

George nods, and, taking one last glance at Lucy, allows her father to slip his arm over his shoulder and lead him down the hallway, past dozens of other glass windows that George never bothers to look into. They don't matter to him. Only one does. Only she matters.

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“I hear you, Carl. I really do. But his name has to be on that paperwork too. And if it’s not, there’s no paperwork. And if there’s no paperwork —”

“I know. I know. But, what am I supposed to do? I half figure you’re talking to him and telling him the same damn thing. You just want *a* name, you don’t care if it’s mine or his or anyone else’s.”

“It’s not my job to care.”

Carl looks at Dr. West sideways, as if trying to convince him to reconsider the statement that he just made about his daughter’s wellbeing.

“It’s not my job to care, Mr. Jordan, but I do anyway because that’s what makes me good at it. And that means I do just want any name on this form because any name is better than no name.”

Carl turns to the ground sheepishly as the doctor hands him the clipboard, pats him on the arm, and turns to walk away, first stopping in front of George, sitting in a worn felt chair in the waiting room, to shake his hand before leaving the two men alone together. He looks at the form in his hand, the big black letters leaping off the top.

#### **ORDER OF CARE - LUCY JORDAN - INDEFINITE**

He runs his finger over those letters, trying to comprehend what they mean but still taking them in as if they are part of a dream. As if they are words on a movie screen. As if they aren’t really condemning his daughter to the rest of her life in a tiny little hospital room. He looks at the next line, skimming through it until he reaches the words “to be accepted by March 19, 2027 or care terminated.”

Care terminated. The polite way to put it. To tell him that they would let Lucy die. Those words stab him in the heart, but part of him, the part that’s a mechanical engineer and likes to build model cars and spend the majority of his free time (maybe too much

time, maybe not enough time with her) at his workbench, part of him understands those words. Understands that this hospital is a machine and that they are running short on an important part: doctors, and nurses, and anyone who can put on a hazmat suit, enter that room, and keep his daughter alive. He knows that across the country, tough choices are being made. People who are sick like his daughter are being given deadlines. Their care is expensive. The protective equipment is in high demand and low supply.

The disease is highly contagious, and 100% fatal. Some die after a couple days, some take a couple years, but at some point in the next decade or so it will kill them. There is nothing the doctors can do other than take the proper precautions, keep their patients comfortable, and wait for the inevitable. But as the disease continues to spread and the numbers pile up, it becomes a question of who you can save and who you cannot save. And the doctors are needed for the patients they can save. Not for Lucy. So tomorrow they are going to leave her room and never enter again, and no one will be there to monitor her equipment, to help her eat her food, to keep her alive.

“Unless I’m there,” Carl thinks.

He looks across the room at George, hair unkempt, head in his hands, eyes wide open staring at the ground. He probably hasn’t slept in over 24 hours, and likely won’t until the doctors are done with their check-in on Lucy. George wants to be the man in that room too, but Carl can’t allow it. George is a good man, and a man Carl was happy enough to walk Lucy down the aisle to, but he and Carl have never exactly been close. Carl sometimes thinks his daughter could have done better, but then he sees the way George looks at her, whether it was looking at her from the altar or through the hospital’s glass window, and he thinks she’s done alright. He looks at the form one last time: March 19th. Tomorrow. He looks at George. Tomorrow.

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Three hours later, the doctors return from Lucy's room and inform George and Carl that they're done and she's awake. Carl looks at Dr. West and asks the unspoken question that he's asked hundreds of times.

"She was in good spirits today," Dr. West informs him. "Cracked a few jokes, said the migraines were mild. It was a good day."

Carl feels a small stream of relief trickle over him as he shakes Dr. West's hand. Good news makes him hopeful enough to ask a question that he is not as optimistic about.

"And... her... movement?"

Dr. West sighs and looks Carl in the eyes. He sees what he hides in them. What he won't tell George. What he won't let Lucy see through the glass.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jordan, but no. It's very rare for this particular disease to cause paralysis in its victims, but when it does, and when it has lasted for six months as it has in your daughter's case, there has never been an instance of recovery. I'm afraid that I must diagnose it as permanent. It will not grow worse. She will maintain use of her neck and head, but everywhere else... permanent."

The relief that Carl felt just moments before washes away, and he finds anger lying in its wake.

"Permanent? And yet you'll still send her away? Send her off to die?"

"She is going to die regardless, Carl, but, no, I don't wish to send her to die. That's why I need a name on the form," Dr. West says, glancing down at Carl's hands as he does.

Carl realizes that he is still holding the clipboard, that he is squeezing it so tight it might snap at any second. He loosens his grip, takes a breath, and looks back at the doctor.

“So you’ll condemn me to die too, then? I must die with her.”

Dr. West places his hands on his hips and tells Carl what he has had to tell too many fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Carl. We’ve had this conversation about a hundred times. If you think I like this... You know I don’t like this. But it’s what we have to do. It’s what we’ve been told to do. Yes, in cases like your... like Lucy’s... it’s very difficult to do that, and that’s why we give someone the opportunity to go with her. Other patients, ones that can take care of themselves in isolation, they don’t get someone to go with them. They are alone. For the rest of their lives. Until it kills them. I knew of a man who went into isolation and lived almost eight more years. Eight years alone. Your daughter doesn’t have to do that. She could have you or,” Dr. West turns to look at George, now fiddling with a vending machine, “she could have him. I know it’s the hardest thing in the world to ask, Mr. Jordan, but I’m not asking for it. And she’s not asking for it. Nobody is asking you to do this, but you have the choice to do this. To go with her.”

Carl follows Dr. West’s eyes to watch George pull a bag of chips out of the bottom of the vending machine.

“And if I do, I’m there forever. And then I die.”

“Yes.”

“Ok.”

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“Mr. Jordan?”

Carl looks up from his book to see George standing in front of him. He knew he was there from the way his body blocks the already dim lighting in the waiting room, but he wanted him to say something first. He has always told him to call him Dad or Carl, but George always uses Mr. Jordan.

“I should probably get going. It’s almost three,” George says.

Carl puts his book down and nods at George.

“I assume you’re coming straight back?”

George shifts his feet and manages a small nod of his own.

“I can’t convince you to go home? Even for an hour. To let her —”

George stands still as he mumbles, “No, Mr. Jordan. I’ll be alright.”

Carl now closes the book and stands up to look at George, placing one hand on his shoulder as if to tell him that’s not what he meant, but George already knew that.

“Are you going to bring her now?”

George meets Carl’s gaze and nods. Carl can see that he’s been crying, but he didn’t have to see his red eyes to know that. There’s so much he wants to say to this young man, and now, with his hand on his shoulder in an empty waiting room, seems like the right time to say it. Instead, he brings George in and gives him a hug before letting him go.

George almost makes it to the big double doors separating the waiting room from the rest of the world before Carl calls back out to him. He turns over his shoulder to see Carl holding up the clipboard.

“When you get back, we have to talk about this. We have to make a decision.”

George doesn’t respond, simply turning away and walking through those doors, but Carl knows he understands.

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While George is gone, Carl decides to go check in on his daughter. He walks down the long hallway of glass windows, of patients who each have their own looming expiration date. Who will be sent off to isolation to die, alone. Carl knows George doesn't look into these windows, that he only cares about Lucy's, but Carl likes to look. He sees some patients who are sicker than Lucy, and some who hardly appear ill at all. Those ones, the ones who are always up reading, or watching TV, or staring out the window, recognize him as Lucy's, and sometimes their, most frequent visitor, and they stop to wave and smile.

Dr. West is right. Lucy is lucky, in a way, because she won't have to be alone. And he's lucky too. Because he gets to be with her. All of these patients' fathers only have the same smile through the glass that Carl can give them. They will never be able to hold or kiss their children again. But Carl can.

The hallway is dark, and the numbers on each room are hard to make out at his age, but Carl has memorized the time and distance to Lucy's room by now, and he stops right in front of her window without even thinking about it. He sees her, awake, staring at the ceiling, and the sight of her shakes him from his thoughts. He waves, and she notices him, turning her head and smiling. Carl grabs a wrinkled scrap of paper from his pocket and unfolds it, holding it up to the glass. Lucy reads the words that she has read countless times before and mouths them back to her father.

"I love you."

Carl sits with her outside her room as she watches television on the screen that the doctors mounted on the ceiling for her. He watches her eyes fluttering around the screen, and he laughs when she laughs, even though he can't see what she's laughing



about. He sits with her for two hours, checking his watch, waiting for the time that he's been dreading for so long.

Lucy takes note of her father's obsession with the time, and she turns her head to him again. She knows what today is. The last day. She knows that her father and George haven't made a decision yet. She knows she can't make that decision for them. She doesn't want to. She can't possibly. She knows that both of them want to be the one that goes with her, but she wouldn't blame them if neither of them did. When she looks at their faces through the glass, she sees what they can't tell her. She sees the pain in George's face, the way his lip quivers when he holds up his hand to the glass. She sees the fear in her father's eyes even though he tries to hide it, tries to look serious, tries to carry the entire weight of the world on his shoulders for her and for everyone. She loves both men so much. She could never ask one to die for her, but she knows that one of them will.

Carl checks his watch again. 4:15. George will be arriving back soon, if he hasn't already, and Carl wants to see them before they come see Lucy. He looks back at his daughter and sees her staring at him, tears that she can't wipe away running down her face. He smiles weakly at her and holds up one finger to say "I'll be right back," before standing up and walking away.

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Carl steps through the door into the waiting room at the same time that George and Sarah walk through the large double doors on the opposite side of the room. George pushes the doors open with one hand, and Sarah clutches his other one in hers. Carl watches her squint as she enters the room. He sees her take it all in, a room unlike any that she has ever seen. She scans the room and notices the table of toys and childrens'

books tucked away in the corner. For half a second, she lets go of George's hand and takes a step towards the toys, but then, scared by the cold unfamiliarity of the room, she changes her mind and wraps her hands around George's finger again, moving closer to her step-father.

Her eyes continue to search until they land on Carl, and she lights up. She looks just like her mother. Just like Lucy. It has to be him. How can George fail to see that? How can he hold that little girl's hand and even think about being the one who signs his name on that piece of paper? How can he think of leaving her like that? But what if it was Alice in that room, all those years ago? What if Carl could have gone with her, would he have left little Lucy behind? No. No, he never would have done that. But he knows what it's like to be the one left behind. For Alice to be gone and for him to still be here. It's guilt and pain and knowing he would give anything for just one more second. He knows how George feels. He knows that little girl needs him. He knows a decision has to be made.

"Granpa!" Sarah squeals as she runs over and leaps into Carl's arms. He stumbles backwards a bit as he catches her, something that never used to happen, but he steadies himself and holds her tight.

He tells her that she's gotten so big, and that he's so happy to see her, and then he sets her down and tells her to go find the toys, that he'll go play with her in a second. He just has to talk to her daddy.

Carl puts her down, and this time she runs over to the toys without a second thought. He takes a seat and motions for George to come sit next to him.

"How is she?" Carl asks, never taking his eyes off of Sarah.

“Good. Okay, I think. She hasn’t asked about her mom in a while, once she realized I wasn’t going to change my answer. But I think she knows why we’re here. She didn’t say anything, but I think something inside of her knows. She was quiet on the way over. She’s never quiet in the car. Especially not after school.”

Carl places his hand on George’s knee and looks his son-in-law in the eyes.

“And how are you, George?”

George doesn’t take his eyes off Sarah as he speaks.

“I know what you’re going to say, Carl. I know you have this idea in your head that it has to be you, and I know that you think I’m a coward if I go in there. I know it’s selfish. I know that the right thing to do is for you to go with Lucy and for me to stay with Sarah. That I should do it for her. But what about me? What if I want to hold my wife’s hand again? What if I want to kiss her again? What if I want to curl up next to her in that bed and lie with her forever? It should be me, Carl. Dammit, why can’t it be me?” George turns to Carl as he speaks, and Carl can see that he’s openly crying now. “I love Sarah, I really do, but... God I’m awful. I can’t even say it. I want Lucy. I want Lucy.”

Carl hands George a tissue and gives himself a second to search for the words he wants to say. Or the words he should say. He doesn’t know if they’re the same thing anymore. Across the room, Sarah picks up a toy train and slides it across the table, back and forth. She looks so much like her mother did at her age. He wonders if Alice looked similar as well. He picks up the clipboard and hands it to George.

“Then be with her.”

George looks at Carl, confused. “I don’t understand.”

“I can’t tell you what to do. One of us needs to go with her. They need a decision. I’ll take care of Sarah. I’m not too old. I can manage. You’re right. This isn’t fair. You and

Lucy had so little time together, and you have a chance to have more. I can't tell you not to take that. I can't tell you to stay behind. You know what this means, though? For her."

Carl looks towards Sarah and then back at George. "And for you."

George looks down at the form, at the line asking for a name, asking for someone to leave with Lucy and never come back. He shifts his gaze to Carl and his eyes answer the question for him.

"Thank you, Carl. I don't... I can't... I just can't leave her."

Carl offers a weak smile to George before nodding towards Sarah and saying, "you should probably go take her in. Lucy's waiting."

George wipes his eyes again and stands up, giving Carl's arm one last squeeze. He walks over to Sarah and crouches down next to her at the table. She looks at him and beams, handing him a train. He smiles and puts it down gently, picking Sarah up and walking towards the door with her.

"Come on, darling. It's time for us to say goodbye."