Reduction

Marian and the new guy, Glen were the only ones in the lab when the reductions arrived, two plastic tubs in a big red bag like a Christmas present. The courier, Bernard, set the bag in the cart beside Marian's bench. He said, "You forgot to lock the back door so I came on in."

Marian glanced at the bag, and then the clock. The door should have been locked at four-thirty. All specimens after that were supposed to be left in the lock box. "Thanks a lot, Bernard."

"Hey, you're welcome," Bernard said. "You should be glad I came in. You wouldn't want these sitting in the lock box overnight, not in this heat. Things get ripe, know what I'm saying?" He raised his white eyebrows. "Never know what you might find in there."

Marian did know what she might find. It wasn't something she could talk about with anyone outside the lab. Her friends either said, "Ick, shut up," or asked how much it cost to have implants, not that they would ever get them, or interrupted to talk about the time they thought they had cancer. In this matter she and Bernard, a widowed semi-retiree from Brooklyn, were in the same boat.

"We'll get right on it," she said.

"You do that." Gratified, Bernard went back out into the hot afternoon. A moment later an elderly couple, the man wielding a cane, the woman enmeshed in a difficult relationship with an aluminum walker, pushed through a patch of red sage at the edge of the walking path and headed toward the door. Marian saw them through the window and groaned. She held up her hands and said, "No, no. Keep away. Tell them this isn't the pain clinic," she told Glen. "It's the other path."

Glen jumped up from his lab stool and went out to intercept the couple. Marian watched him pointing to the other side of the cluster of office buildings. She could tell he had to repeat himself. She always had to repeat herself, when pain clinic patients wandered into the lab by mistake. The couples, like this one, broke her heart with their evident lifetime of loyalty to each other in sickness and in health. Glen shooed them away, then came back in and locked the back door. "Sorry I forgot before," he said. Glen was about forty-five, ten years older than she was. He was old enough not to be doing this kind of work for this kind of pay. He wasn't bad-looking, though. Marian had never gone for underslung jaws, but now she thought maybe she had been too picky. Fifty years from now, when they were forging down the wrong path together, would it matter?

Glen picked up the red bag and hefted it. "What's in here? Fruitcake?" He wanted to break the tension caused by his mistake, she could tell.

She said, "Nothing that interesting." Nothing like a good squamous cell carcinoma, she meant, or a melanoma, or a mysterious blistering dermatitis.

"Feels interesting to me," Glenn said.

It was four forty-five. Marian's plan, which she had written on a sticky note and stuck in the pocket of her scrubs that morning, was to clock out at five, stop at the store for her kids' Friday treat

and get home before it rained. She had to buy milk, eggs, and bread for French toast because Nathan and Holly had been good this week. “Good” was a flexible term—at the minimum it meant that when she got home no one would be sitting on the kitchen table naked except for face paint, and no one would be cooking up a batch of old Halloween candy with the burner set on Hi. Her kids liked eating breakfast for supper, unless it was oatmeal. In that case they treated it like medicine, and cajoled each other with heaping teaspoons. “Come on dearie, take your medicine,” Holly, the eleven-year-old, would say, and seven-year-old Nathan would shake his head and cry, “No, no,” and after a few minutes some of the oatmeal would be eaten.

Glen untied the bag and peered in. An odor of formalin wafted out. Something had spilled in transit. It would take longer to teach him what to do than it would for her to do it herself, but he had to learn. Marian checked the sky. It was brilliant blue in the middle, but there were towering popcorn-shaped clouds around the horizon, white turning to gray, ramping up for another storm. There was a depression in the sandy area between the lab and the walking path and every monsoon season it filled with rainwater. Dragonflies glittered in the air above it. The acacia tree leaned down as if to drink. Marian’s boss hated the transient pond as a source of mosquitoes, hence West Nile virus. A horse had died of West Nile last summer right here in Tucson, and her boss owned a horse. Hence… Marian tried not to look excited about the pond when her boss was around.

“Now what do I do?” Glen had the tubs out of the plastic bag. He had even printed a numbered label and stuck it at the top of the requisition form.

It was four-fifty. Marian gave him an encouraging smile. “Weight, measurements, visual inspection, then cut representative sections for slides. It’s like any other specimen.”

“There’s so much of it.” Glen read the requisition, squinting at the handwritten notes. “Bilateral breast reduction.” He looked at her and she nodded. He said, “Jeez,” and pulled on a fresh pair of rubber gloves. He reached into the first tub and pulled out the specimen. It made a sloshy, squishy sound. She could tell he was trying not to touch it, but he was also very afraid of dropping it. A film of perspiration highlighted a tiny scar between his eyes.

“Rinse,” she said, turning on the water for him. He rinsed the specimen and set it on the plastic lid of the tub. He wiped his forehead on his arm and turned his face away for a moment.

“Here we go big team!” Marian said. “Weight?”

He set the mass on the scales. “One hundred thirty-seven grams.”

“Write it down.” Step by step she walked him through the procedure, all the time aware of the minute hand clicking along on the clock. Together they traversed the patient’s right breast, probing and not finding anything wrong, except that there was so much of it, too much of a good thing. She showed him how to cut it into sections. He said, “I’m not usually squeamish,” and placed the chosen sections in plastic cassettes and snapped them shut. “One down, one to go,” Marian said. “Unless you want me to do the other one.”

“I can do it myself,” he said.

“Go for it,” Marian told him.

Glenn stabbed at the requisition with his gloved finger. “I couldn’t help noticing that the patient is only twenty-six. It seems like she’s making a serious life decision here. I hope she doesn’t regret it later.”

“In what way?” Marian watched the scalpel waver in the air while he thought.

“She might want to get married. Her husband might wish she hadn’t done this. She might want to have kids and, you know, she wouldn’t be able to, you know, be a real mother to them.” He blushed and frowned at the mass in front of him.

“There’s more than one way to feed a child,” Marian said, trying not to blush herself.

Glen kept his head down. “I wouldn’t do it if I were a woman, is all I’m saying. I don’t think it’s natural.”

Marian said, trying for a humorous tone, “I guess making things smaller isn’t your idea of improvement.”

“No.” He blushed again. “I’m just saying, if I met a woman who’d done this to herself, I’d probably walk away.”

Marian realized his blushing signified outrage. She said, “A woman has a right to decide what to do about her own body.”

“That’s what they always say.”

“They sure do.” Marian pointed to the second specimen. “What comes first?”

“Rinse, then weigh,” he said.

She walked him through the second biopsy, pausing before each step to allow him to remember it on his own. She sometimes, as now, she allowed herself to imagine a job that involved handling luxurious fabrics. All day she would feel the weight and texture of thick silks in her hands. Her skin would be almost as smooth as the silk.

“Done.” Glenn stripped off his gloves and cast them into the wastebasket as if they were morally soiled. “Do we get many of these?”

“A few. You did fine. Don’t forget to clock out.”

He said, “Marian, I already have a mother.”

“Sorry,” she said, and wished him a good weekend.

The room was cooler and quieter with Glenn gone. She had everything cleaned up by five-forty and was ready to go when she realized that he had forgotten to take out the trash. She grabbed the first of the two big white trash bags and pulled the ties tight. Each one held at least fifteen pounds of packaging and used lab wipes, plus any personal trash the girls had tossed out. Jody had had a cold all week, so there were lots of crumpled tissues. Marian unlocked the back door and carried the lumpy bag out in both arms. The garbage bin was at the end of the parking lot where the walking path curved toward the Heart Center. She walked on the path sometimes on her lunch hour. In the summer it was so

hot that she only stayed out twenty minutes, and spent the rest of her lunch hour guzzling ice water. She dumped the bag into the bin and turned to head back when a sudden gust of wind enveloped her in a cocoon of grit and tiny leaves. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to breathe in the dust. When the wind swirled away she opened her eyes and saw a black-clad leg disappearing through the lab door. She had locked the front door an hour ago, but just now, for the two minutes it took to take out the garbage, she had left the back door unlocked. He must have been loitering on the walking path, watching his chance. She scanned the parking lot, but there was no one around. The pain clinic closed at five on Fridays. The Heart Institute was even further away. She ran across the parking lot and pulled the door open as slowly as she could.

The man stood between her and her phone. He was about forty, with shaggy, sandy hair. He was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt. He stood with his back to the specialty stainer, a piece of equipment worth a few hundred thousand dollars.

Marian said, “What’s up, doc?”

He turned his head and she saw that he wasn’t that bad-looking in spite of his weathered skin. He said, “Just looking around. Is this where you cook up the pain meds?” He had a hoarse, country-Western kind of voice.

“There isn’t any medicine here. This isn’t that kind of lab.” She looked at the clock. It was five fifty-three.

“You keep drugs here for pain. I’m in pain.” He took a couple of limping steps toward her and held out his hands as if showing off his lameness.

Marian shook her head. “You’re looking for the pain clinic. It’s on the other side.” She pointed toward the northeast corner of the office park. “People come in here all the time by mistake. They’re closed now. You’ll have to come back and ask them for drugs on Monday.”

“Bullshit,” he said.

“For heaven’s sake,” she said. “The only chemicals we have here are the kind that eat away your mucous membranes. This is a pathology laboratory. We’re not into pain.” She pointed to the jars where the breast leftovers floated in formalin. “This is what we do. It’s not pretty but it’s a living.”

The man looked around at the trays, the microtomes, the stainer and the cutting bench but his gaze kept coming back to the jars.

He said, “You’re just trying to freak me out. Just give me your money.”

Marian said, “Why do you need cash? So you can take the bus to church?” The man smiled in spite of himself, but then he said, “Shut up. Give me your money.” Marian felt a twig in her hair. She pulled it out and rubbed it between her fingers, thinking help, help me.

Footsteps crunched outside in the gravel and she heard someone fumbling at the lock box. Bernard must have come back with a rush case.

“My buddy,” she said. “He checks the back door of the pain clinic and then he comes in for a chat. He’ll be back in about two minutes. He’s older, his wife died last year. He spends all his spare time

in target practice. He'd just as soon shoot you and lie about it later. I yell for help and he takes out his gun, bang, and you're lying in the gravel with ants in your eyes. The little red ones. Your soul will burn up before it even gets to hell."

The man stared at her as if she had put a spell on him, and indeed, that was what she had tried to do. He went to the door and looked out, and she noticed a large knife in a sheath tucked into the back of his pants. She waved her fingers at him and said, "Shoo. Get while the getting's good." A moment later he was gone.

She went to her lab stool and climbed onto it. Her legs were shaking as if she had been electrified. She wanted to call her children, but her voice would tremble and they would know something was wrong. She would clock out, stop at the store, go home, make French toast, and then she would be able to speak in her usual tone of voice to them—but not about this, not about any of it.

She left the second garbage bag where it was. She set the alarm, locked the door behind her, and ran to her car. The sky was no longer sky blue, but a blue-black entity hanging over the city, heavy with rain. She had an old CD of Gregorian chant in the glove box. She put it in the player and tried not to think of anything but driving. A finger of silver lightning flickered across the sky as she pulled out into traffic.

The organic market was more expensive, but closer than Safeway. She bought milk, eggs, and a quart of organic maple walnut ice cream, no bad cow hormones included, and a recyclable bag, though she had a dozen at home. The store's lights flickered while she was waiting in line. She counted the seconds while the clerk rang up her groceries and double-bagged the ice cream.

The rain was coming down hard enough to justify using the windshield wipers. On the west side, where she lived, a ray of sun slanted through the clouds and cast a thin golden light on Tumamoc Hill. Marian remembered one morning when Nathan had opened the front door and said, "I'm going to climb that mountain." And one afternoon she'd come home to find that Holly had dressed the cat in a princess doll dress and coaxed it to sit on a homemade cardboard throne. A pickup passed her car and threw a spray of water across her windshield, and for a moment she couldn't see anything but water. She let go of the phone and held onto the steering wheel with both hands.

The first dip on Santiago Street had water running across it. She gunned the engine and swooshed through. The sky was dark enough to turn on the lights and close the curtains, which was what she planned to do the minute she got inside. She pulled into the carport and carried the groceries around to the front door. The rain was pelting down now, gushing out of the downspout. She found her keys in the side pocket of her scrubs and simultaneously remembered that she had forgotten to buy bread. Then she remembered half a package of hamburger buns in the freezer. Waste not, want not, she would tell them.

The house was dark. She said, "Hi, I'm home." There was no reply, not even the sound of small movements, Nathan playing with his lunar rover behind the couch, or Holly doing her homework. Marian flipped the light switch in the hall but the house remained dark. She tried to think. If the electricity had gone off the kids might have gone to a neighbor's house. Holly's friend Dana lived two blocks away in a more expensive part of the neighborhood. Maybe they had electricity. Would she have taken Nathan with her? One day last winter she had come home to find Holly gone to a friend's house

and Nathan shivering on the front porch, locked out.

She was a bad mother.

She moved slowly into the dark kitchen. Her throat tightened and she was just reminding herself to breathe when her foot touched something dense but soft. She was aware of cloth, flesh, and familiar small bones. A hoarse cry flew from her mouth. She fell to her knees and grasped a leg in too-short jeans. She picked Nathan up. He flopped in her arms. She cried his name, and then "Holly!" Clasping Nathan she crawled across the floor until she came to the second body. She found the soft face and began to slap it. She didn't deserve them. She would die without them.

"Ow! Mom, stop it!" Holly said. She sat up. Marian could just make out her eyes gleaming in the darkness. Nathan's muscles regained their strength and he wriggled out of her arms. He said, "Did you think we were really dead?"

"Obviously she did. Mom, you said, 'Please, God.' Are you religious?" Holly asked.

Marian sat back, then lay back on the floor. "I can't, I can't," she panted. She felt the children watching her but she couldn't sit up. Tears poured out of her eyes, the inside of her head was full of tears.

"We'll help you pick up the groceries," Holly said in a tender tone. There was a flash of light, not lightning. Nathan had turned on his lunar rover flashlight.

The eggs were broken, she had hurled them to the floor. The plastic milk bottle was dented and leaking.

"Ooh-ick," Holly said. ""Scrambled."

"I spy with my little eye some ice cream. Can we have it?" Nathan said.

"We were so good. We waited here in the dark for you like little angels," Holly said in her prissiest voice.

""Pour the milk into the plastic jug and put it in the fridge. Throw the eggs in the garbage. Rinse off the ice cream carton," Marian said. She sat on the floor and watched them carry out her instructions. They were voracious for sweet things. On their birthdays she let them choose any kind of cereal they wanted and they always chose the most brightly-colored product on the shelf, something that was thirty per cent marshmallows and ten per cent food coloring.

"Were you scared, Mom? Did you think we were dead?" Nathan asked with his mouth full.

"I was scared out of my wits. My heart nearly stopped. Please, please don't ever do that to me again. I can't bear it." The tears were still coming. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

The children giggled. Holly held out a spoon with a generous helping of ice cream in it. "Take your medicine, dearie. You'll soon feel better."

Marian shook her head and said, "No, no." But with some coaxing she was persuaded.