

Pantheon

She's going to die either way.

The attending is growing impatient, I can tell. I can see it in her tired eyes and shuffling feet. I can't blame her. To me, she feels like a tired god. Omnipotent and miles away and six steps ahead and rooted in this room all at once. The night has been both unseemingly long and yet never ending, the cold of winter shoving the sunrise farther and farther away. The attending knows, as do the resident, the nurses, the respiratory techs, and me, the medical student in the back. We all know that this patient is going to die, no matter what.

The husband can't, won't, *refuses*, to accept that. I can't blame him either.

Before the husband's eyes, Janus, god of choices, hovers at the foot of his dying wife's bed. *Choose*, he says, *choose, and she may live*. Janus is loud, louder than we can be. The husband is drowning and we're speaking but there's water clogging his ears and he can't hear us. His eyes are blurred, but he can see the god of choices is perched upon his wife's chest and daring him to choose to let her die.

Janus is a liar. She's going to die either way. I don't know how to tell the husband that, so my tongue sits heavy in my mouth.

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Before Janus waltzed into the patient's room, before the attending spoke, before the husband's world tunnelled into two choices, I rode up the elevator with the resident. A surgeon,

he fit my stereotype; eager for results, quick, direct. He drummed his fingers against the railing erratically, words flying out of his mouth.

“It’s a shit situation. If we operate, she’ll die. If we don’t operate, she’ll die. Part of me wonders why we’re even offering.”

My mind had created a strict rule; surgeons *do*. At least, that's what I gleaned when shadowing an orthopedic surgeon last summer. When I asked him why he chose his field he told me simply that he couldn't fathom not being able to *do*. He craved action and immediate outcomes. To him, nothing felt more tangible than a physical fix in the operating room. Yet here the resident was, saying the opposite. I understood it, of course I did. *Doing* may not fix it. *Doing* may make it worse. But if we don’t *do*, then what is the point of us at all?

“Are you going to operate?” I ask. Are you going to *do*?

“Depends on the family. Sucks though. She’s gonna die either way, but we can’t just say that, so we gotta do this stupid dance around it instead,” he answers, almost lackadaisical.

Dance. The word sits heavy in my chest. In Hinduism, Lord Shiva, the God of Destruction dances the *tandav* and wrecks annihilation. He does this in his role of supreme balancer, making way for new creation in the universe. In the grand cosmic scheme, some things must die for others to be born. I can see Lord Shiva standing next to the resident in the elevator, lacing the bells onto his ankles to begin his deadly performance.

Despite all I knew of the power of equilibrium, death doesn’t feel like a dance to me.

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The patient's room feels hollow. The doorway is stained maroon from years of scrub-clad shoulders leaning against it, mine joining the tradition. She sits in the bed, drowning in blankets with tubes and IVs snaking around her, into her. If you replace every wooden plank on Theseus' ship one by one, when does it stop being Theseus' ship? With her lungs and her heart and her kidneys mechanically supported and the resident's ominous prognosis swirling in my head, I want to believe she was already gone. Wouldn't it be easier then, to just let it all go? It seemed that the resident, blunt as a wooden club, already had.

To the side, her two children sit. They must be close to my age. Exhaustion clings to their eyes as they hold on for dear life to every word the resident says. They are out at sea, lost, grasping at errant bits of rope in a desperate effort to stay afloat. There is no Janus for them; just their mother, her life humming quietly in the background of the room. I'm sure Lord Shiva can hear the humming too, that sad but sweet tune as he prepares for his performance at the edge of the room.

Behind me, the patient's husband appears. He had been sent to take a nap. He states he didn't sleep; I believe him easily. His daughter scolds him half-heartedly, standing up to let him take her chair. Lord Shiva disappears. The resident begins to explain the options again. The resident has been awake for more hours than I want to imagine; I do not envy his job in the slightest. He is talking to the husband, talking to the room, talking to the walls at this point because the minute the husband sat in that chair he was transported halfway across the universe to a world where his wife wasn't disappearing in front of him. His son grabs his shoulder, tries to anchor him back to the room. The resident sighs, voice hoarse from talking in circles and hands itchy from idleness.

Like a stroke of divine intervention, the attending walks in. She's strong and sure and confident. She has a plan, I know she does. Like a lightning rod, she grounds the room. The resident is visibly relieved at the prospect of not having to do this dance alone.

I forget, as I am prone to do as a medical student, that the attending is not a god. To me, she is capable of holding the entire insurmountable breadth of surgery on the tip of her finger. In reality, she is Atlas, shoulders are screaming from holding the weight of the sky. No, that's not it either. She is a human, and it has been a very long night, and this case is incredibly complicated, and she is squeezing the words from her own bones to put in front of the family.

It is painfully obvious that the family has no idea what she is saying. She's talking about hypovolemic shock and dialysis and palliation and other 50-point winning words, and the crease in the son's brow grows so deep I worry it will burrow straight through his skull. The daughter is watching the surgeon warily and I can see the gears turning in her head as she tries to riddle out the puzzle. The husband continues to stare at his wife. In the background I know the patient's life is fading, her tune softening with each moment. There are words being spoken, sound waves that are filling the air but it's not doing anything, it's not connecting. She's dancing around them, peppering papercuts upon them when she means to drive a dagger through their flesh. I ground my teeth, growing more anxious with each passing moment. I wanted her to just say it, to take her surgical scissors and snip the string like one of the Fates.

Finally, she does. Her voice is quiet, but the message rings through the room. I see Janus materialize and perch himself at the edge of the bed, feet dangling in the air. He looks nothing like his portrayals in art. There he was human. Strange, with his two opposing heads, but human nonetheless. Here, he's a vague creature; an amalgamation of features crushed into a single person. His eyes and noses keep switching from face to face, lips peeling against crooked teeth.

I don't think the kids can see Janus. I think they see through him, looking at their mother. The daughter's hand comes to her mouth, hoping to hide her quivering lips. It reminds me of a story where Lord Ganesha, elephant-headed god of wisdom and intellect, is challenged to a race around the world. Knowing he can't win on speed alone, he chooses to circle around his parents instead. He knows his strengths and plays into them, and his parents are charmed with his performance.

My vision shifts, and suddenly it's not a stranger in the bed. It's my loved one, and the grief rips through my lungs. I want a trick—to be able to circle around them, and wrap them in my love and keep them close. The impending loss bites into my chest and clenches tight. I feel like Prometheus, chained to a mountain with eagles pecking away at my liver, and I realize why the doctor's words were evaporating into thin air earlier. A cloud of last-ditch hope clings to me, and I recognize that, like the kids, I, too, would fight tooth and nail and rib and liver and god knows what other body part to keep my loved ones here.

The son shudders and I'm broken out of my trance, Janus' voice ringing in my ears. *Choose*, he says to the husband, *choose, and she may live*. His voice is high pitched, scraping against my skull like nails on a chalkboard.

"We've been married for 60 years," the patient's husband says quietly. Next to him, his son tries to brush away a tear. "I don't think I know how to exist without her."

Janus shifts, clambering over the bed and perching himself on the patient's chest. The husband is looking straight through Janus, at his wife's face. He doesn't care about Janus or the attending or any of us. In his mind's eye, he's watching his entire life with his wife play out, and a ghost of a smile dances on his lips. Janus with his ever shifting features begins to slow and coalesce into one cohesive face, his jagged teeth shrinking till he's nothing more than an ordinary

man. I realize then that it was never a choice between life or death, truth or lies. The husband caresses his ring and leans into his children, eyes closing. He nods once, still smiling, and Lord Shiva takes Janus' place.

In the end, I don't stay. The resident quietly tells me to leave, and I oblige. Later, as I stand waiting for my bus, I can hear the choreographed pounding of feet and tinkling of bells. It builds, before stopping abruptly. The first rays of the sun start to rise.