

## Valentine

By Laney Cairo

Some days were diamonds, but this was not one of them.

The coffee was turgid: too cold, too strong, and most of all, too instant. I was tired, the kind of exhaustion that ate into my bones, so that each movement dragged and hurt.

It was all mental, of course, though I probably could do with some sleep. Sometimes, the dignity and strength with which my patients let go of life made me ashamed of myself, with all my petty concerns and frustrations.

Quarter past two. I should go home, sleep for a while, let my brand-new resident take the pager, give up on the hope of finding Matthew during his lunch break.

Linda, the resident, looked up from the omelette she was bolting down.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Dr. Maynard?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I ate, um... last night.”

There had been food at the patient’s home, provided by his relatives, all rallying around with casseroles and cakes, keen to feed the doctors and the minister.

Linda put her knife and fork down with a clatter, startling me.

“God, I’m shattered,” Linda said. “And I’ve only been doing this for two weeks...” She shook her head.

It had been a tough couple of weeks, even by my standards.

“Why don’t you go home, spend some time with your family, get some sleep?”

Linda shrugged. “Is that what you do?”

“It’s what I do.”

Linda stood up and picked up her tray. “All right,” she said. “Shouldn’t you get some sleep too?”

“I will.”

When Linda had pushed her tray onto the collection trolley and left the cafeteria, I turned my attention back to my coffee.

I couldn’t sleep with my eyes open, not like some people, so I was pretty sure I was only distracted, rather than asleep, when Matthew clattered a tray onto the table and slid into the seat beside me.

He looked tired too, skin pale against the dark blue scrubs he wore, skin on his hands abraded and red from scrubbing up, but he was still the best thing I’d seen in a damned long time.

We shared a smile, then he began to scoff down his lunch, alternating shovelling fried rice into his mouth with long gulps of soda.

I let him eat, and it wasn’t until he pushed his plate away and covered his mouth to burp, that I touched him, covering his other hand with my own.

He glanced at me and squeezed my hand. “Bad morning? I heard you get up during the night when your pager went off.”

“Patient self-delivered,” I said. “It took some time.”

Matthew nodded and lifted my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles briefly. “I did a C-section,” he said, lowering my hand back down again. “Baby was OP, fetal distress. When I made the final incision, the baby’s eyes were open, and it looked up at me through the membranes, just before I ruptured them.”

Matthew’s voice was steady, but I knew him well enough to hear the joy.

“How’s the baby?” I asked, and his fingers tightened around mine.

“First set of APGARs was dodgy, but he pinked up well, so the second set was an eight. Is this why people have children? Because of what’s it like to make a person?”

“Sometimes,” I said. “I like the synchronicity of me watching someone leave this world, while you helped someone into it. It’s a good balance. Did they name the baby after you?”

Matthew laughed, and I didn’t feel so tired anymore.

“Not this time,” he said. “They named the little mite Valentine, poor thing.”

I must have written the date fifty times already, fourteenth of the second, in that order, over and over, without it registering. My stomach dropped, and I said, “Oh, fuck.”

Matthew laughed again, like he did when he was teasing me. “Don’t panic,” he said. “I made a reservation for dinner weeks ago.”

“I love you,” I said fervently, startling the herd of nurses at the next table, if the giggles were any guide. “I love you, I love you.”

“Love you too,” Matthew said, disentangling his hand from mine and standing up. “Go home, get some sleep, because I’m not taking you out to dinner if you’re going to fall asleep in the soup.”

“I think I just rediscovered my will to live,” I said, standing up and picking up my abandoned coffee.

Matthew kissed my cheek, inspiring another burst of giggles from the nurses, then he was gone, off to deliver babies or, perhaps, conquer the world. Me? I was going home to sleep, then we were going out to dinner.

“Fancy calling a baby Valentine!” I muttered, finding a place on the collection trolley for my mug. “*There’s* something there should be legislation against.”