

New Novel - Title TBD

By David G. Colquitt

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Chapter 1

The mechanical breathing machine continued its rhythmic hissing. Its diaphragms sucked in more air to then be pushed through the plastic tube which was stationed with clear tape at the patient's mouth. The fresh air filled his lungs with the vital oxygen to keep his weak heart beating.

Five other people were in the room—the mother and father, sister and brother, and the wife. Tears were streaming from all but the father's eyes. He sat in a chair in the corner of the hospital room, staring at the tiled floor.

A nurse came in periodically. The others gave her no attention as she popped in and out for some random task—pushing a button, swapping an IV drip, adding supplies to a drawer.

The mother held her son's hand, fingers entwined, his arm pressed against her breast. "We love you, darling. Please wake up. Please wake up," she pleaded softly.

A finger twitched in her hand. She squeezed a little tighter. "That's it, honey, you come back to us now."

The sister slowly swept her fingers across his forehead.

The ventilator was the constant disquieting reminder of a reality they found hard to understand. Hiss, release, hiss, release, each sequence like a pronouncement to the family of the man's utter dependency on it—'He's only alive because of me.' It beeped at intervals—a voice to inform staff of vital signs—and steadfastly continued the job it was built to do.

The father, having decided that sitting in the corner for too long and not knowing how to act in this situation, slowly rose and stepped slowly toward his son. Halfway to the bed, he stopped. He now had a clearer view. The white cotton blanket over his son's severely distended belly lifted and sank, matching the rhythm of the machine. He changed his path and decided that looking out the window was a better option.

The nurse entered again, this time to speak with the family.

"Have you all had some time to talk?" Her manner was business-like, distinctly different from the room's emotion. She was not a young nurse and this was not her first experience with a grieving family. Desensitization happens over time in her job. She knew the outcome—had seen it too many times before. Soon this room would be occupied by another patient.

The meaning behind her question to the family was to find out if they'd made a decision. Twenty minutes prior, the doctor was there to let the family know there was nothing more they could do. The long battle his organs had fought against the many years of substance abuse and neglect was nearly over. His liver was not functioning and, even if there was a donor available, there were other organs that were close to failing, and his lungs were already coated with blood. His life was now entirely dependent on mechanical support and soon that would not sustain him.

Having already had the difficult discussion and facing the reality of what seemed to be the only choice, the family looked back at the patient. His eyelids were mostly closed, small slits with just enough room to see his eyes move back and forth. Suddenly the eyelids opened. The three at his bedside gasped in unison. What they saw were eyes that looked out but showed no sign of recognition. The once blue irises were now faded and grayish, surrounded by dingy yellow. The lids closed and the shifting pattern returned.

Only the mother and daughter turned to the nurse with hopefulness for the

miracle they'd been praying for. Why wasn't she rushing to get the doctor or perform some emergency medical treatment?

"That can happen," she flatly said. "It's an involuntary reaction that his body remembers."

Roger's mother and sister stared back with mouths partly open.

"I'm sorry, it doesn't change anything about his condition," the nurse added, snuffing out any encouragement from the sign.

The mother sobbed.

After a moment of silence, the wife spoke. "Can I have some time with him?" She directed the question at the mother, though it was meant for everyone.

"Of course," replied the mother softly. They all slowly moved out of the room and the nurse closed the door.

The wife, who had been standing at the foot of the bed, moved over to his side. She lifted her husband's arm and rested it on his chest to clear a small space for her to sit.

She looked at the helpless man in the bed. She thought about the years they'd had. Random memories passed through her mind. Moments in time with a strong-willed and determined man, a profound contrast to the utterly incapable body in front of her, absent of any will or determination, a flexible tube forced through his mouth and into his lungs. She watched his face and gently smiled.

As she leaned in closer, she quietly said, "Can you hear me, Roger? I hope you can." Unsure of his ability to comprehend, she wanted to make sure he knew who was speaking to him. "It's Candice."

Candice paused to frame the message she longed to give him, so much she'd been unable to say for so many years.

"Do you know how hard it is to hide from your family the joy I feel behind these tears?"

She could see the movement of his eyes underneath the closed lids, giving her hope that he could hear and understand.

She leaned even closer to his ear and continued, "This is a good day. A very good day!" She smiled at the thought of an end. "You...you are..." She suppressed

several colorful adjectives as she fought the emotions, her mouth starting the words that never came. Then she said, "I hate you!" The words felt surprisingly insufficient, so she repeated, "I *hate* you! You have been a torture in my life... and now I'll finally be free. You can't hurt me anymore." She slowly sat up and looked over his dying body. After a moment she added, "I don't know where you're headed, and I don't care. That's up to God. But one thing I know for sure...my life begins today! Goodbye, Roger."

Candice stood and went to the door to let the family back in, tears of happiness still evident on her face. Roger's mother reached up and wiped a tear from her soon-to-be ex-daughter-in-law's face, firmly believing the tears to be deep sadness.

The nurse returned with an assistant, a very tall and heavy black man whose scrubs were at their limits for size. He waited by the door as the attending nurse stood near the bedside. She did not need to repeat her question.

Roger's mother quietly pronounced the decision. "We're ready to let him go."

The nurse turned and nodded to her assistant. He walked to the other side of the bed where the machine and tubes were. His manner was noticeably different than his boss. "I'm very sorry for your loss," he offered with a heavy South African accent.

Surprised at the merciful attempt at comfort, the mother and sister returned the gesture with a slight smile of thanks. Candice's gaze was fixed on her husband, awaiting the carrying out of a sentence.

Roger's father stood at the foot of the bed.

They all watched Roger, his abdomen continued to match the rhythm of the machine.

The kind-hearted nurse twisted the valve of the I.V., shutting off its flow. He peeled the tape from Roger's arm and slid the needle from his skin. Then he turned and switched off the ventilator. Each action another step in the methodical process of ending a life in a hospital room.

The big man's fingers gently stripped off the tape around Roger's mouth and slowly pulled the long plastic hose from his lungs.

Not knowing what to expect, the family watched as Roger's body worked at breathing on its own again. His belly continued to expand and contract. Within a minute, the breathing slowed, until finally there was no more. No more breathing, no more

Roger.

Roger's mother heaved with sobs, his sister bowed her head and shook, and tears finally ran down his father's cheeks.

Candace turned and walked from the room and tried to hide her smile from the hospital staff as she made her way to the elevators.