

EASTERN IOWA REVIEW

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AGAINST LIFE

At the end of each work day, paper goes in the incinerator. Page by page, the world becomes a safer place.

Burning marks the end of each day's stress. We all learn to compartmentalize -- otherwise no one could work -- but doubt colors our days. After the burning, I breathe more easily. In the fire, paper curls and flakes into harmless ash. A gray powder to be buried underground.

Today's pages were birth certificates. The irony: each new life heralded with danger. Of course, these certificates were old, documenting births from my parents' generation. Paper wasn't dangerous at the time.

At the repository, they're sorted, scanned, and burned by archivists like me. So much paper still lingers in the world, arriving during the night. Each morning, we archivists receive our bins; opening them to find the documents inside feels like a horrible corruption of Christmas. What parent would use opaque wrappings to shroud in mystery a present that could kill?

Then the scanning. Before touching a single sheet, I pull on my work gloves. Check that my forearms are sheathed by the fabric of my long-sleeved laboratory coat. When I work, only my face is exposed. We've asked after masks, occasionally, but that much unguarded skin has been deemed "acceptable risk" by our superiors. Although carelessness could spell doom. It was before my time at this facility, but I've heard from several people that, shortly before I was hired, a beardless man was rushing at the end of the day and brought a sheet too near his chin and nicked himself. At that point, the rumors diverge. Perhaps it's nothing but a scare story for new recruits. Some told me that doctors amputated the careless worker's jaw. Others whispered that he died.

I move the final sheet from the surface of the scanner to my outbound bin -- *Timothy Mosely, b. Jan 18, 1993* -- and activate the conveyor to ferry the bin toward the incinerator. I stand, pause for a moment to stretch, rolling my too-tense neck to the right and the left, then stroll down the aisle, following my bin. My shoes pad gently on the floor, the conveyor's motor whirs, and the room is filled with the cumulative whisper of some hundred other archivists sliding paper across smooth scanner glass.

The conveyor stops once my day's crate is alongside the incinerator grate. I reach in with my still-gloved hand. One by one, after a quick glance at each to ensure that none was missed, I feed documents to the flames.

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Traffic was light for my drive home, other than a short stretch of construction that narrowed the roadway to four lanes. The audio stream had an investigative journalism piece on Tyson's foray into heirloom meats. It seemed implausible that these could be anything but fakes, but some people want so badly to believe. And the company used a clever method to obscure telltale sequences in the DNA. But the journalists found their breeding facility. Only a few animals inside, decoys clearly, and even these were pocked with wasting blight. Shoppers had bought overpriced synthetics.

The piece reminded me how lucky I am. My husband is quite the cook, able to work wonders from the generic vats. Enough that, while shopping, I've never succumbed to that siren call of cuts that purport their taste -- or even, in the case of Tyson, their provenance! -- to be "classic."

Within fifty minutes, I was home. I parked in the garage and rode the elevator upstairs and strolled down the hall to our front door. If I were a character on a video stream, I'm sure I would've been whistling.

I opened the door and everything changed.

There, sitting on the couch, was my husband, hugging our daughter to his chest. And crying. He looked at me beseechingly before he stood, still carrying our daughter. Claire is four years old, but in his arms she looked very small.

"I'm so sorry, Mara," he said with a crackle in his voice. "It's my fault. I should've followed her more carefully. Or ... I wish we'd stayed home today. Or ..." but his voice trailed off. He looked pathetic, snot in his mustache, wet glistening beneath his eyes.

Claire's eyes, too, were fixed upon me, glossed by a liquid sheen.

"What happened?"

"We wanted to work on her balance. Like you and I had talked about. So I took her to the playground. I was a fool, assuming *that* would be a safe space ..."

"Please, just ..."

"Look!" He pulled up Claire's pant leg and showed me, there, alongside her shin, a bandage. It covered two inches of her leg; I could only guess at the depth of the scratch beneath.

I felt dizzy. As though my heart had skipped a beat. Dazed, I shuffled to the couch, steadied myself momentarily with a hand upon its arm, then sat. It took a few moments before I was ready to ask, "How did it happen?"

My husband sat beside me, laying our little Claire's head down in my lap. His voice was tremulous. "It's my fault, I know. I should have made her slow down. She wasn't ready yet, to walk so fast! She was rushing and tripped. And then! There must be an imperfection in the catchwall. In the plastic tubing. Something *must* have been jutting out, to scratch and break her skin. I was a fool to let her play without inspecting ... and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry ..."

The story was for me, but the apologies seemed directed toward Claire. By the time he was whispering his "sorry"s, his gaze was fixed on her. She's such a good kid. She smiled meekly and reached out to pat his arm. Gracious even today.

"Did you tell someone?"

"All afternoon I've been on the phone with her doctors ..."

"About the catchwall? If someone else's child falls ..."

"Oh. No. Not yet. I've been too ... I would ... please, if you could call for me? It'd be too hard, explaining how I know to ... to some faceless bureaucrat ..."

"But I don't know which playground. Which pathway it was. Where on the equipment. It'd be ..."

"Yes. Yes. You're right. It's fine. I need to ... yes, I'll call. I'll do it now, and then ... God, I've gotten nothing done. I'm sorry. You'll still need to eat. I'll call and then cook something for you and Claire. Maybe you can ring her doctor again? Although I don't know if you'll get more out of her than I did ..."

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Dr. Franklin couldn't tell me much that I hadn't immediately guessed. Medicine has gotten better since my husband and I were kids. In those days, it was rare for any family block to go more than a few years without hearing news of someone else's child who had died. Of my own friends, there was Amy, when I was six, Cal at nine, and then, who was it? Vicky when we were ten or twelve. Each wilted fast. Now, according to Dr. Franklin, infection won't spell such quick doom. But our tools still aren't good enough. We can slow. We cannot stop.

Dr. Franklin suggested two courses of action, neither promising. We could amputate the limb, laser ablate the stump, and pray that it would heal. Dr. Franklin herself included "pray" as the third step of treatment.

Or we could take our daughter to the big medical facility downtown and have them irradiate the cut, hoping that high-energy bombardment would be enough to cause irreparable mutations in any bacteria. This would be less likely to cure, and carried, to use Dr. Franklin's word, an "astronomical" risk of cancer, but the cancer wouldn't strike until at least a decade down the line, maybe longer. Which meant, Dr. Franklin said, "You'll likely see her to high school prom. Maybe college graduation. And there's less risk *now* of that treatment making matters worse."

A few seconds passed. I exhaled softly while stroking my daughter's hair. Her eyes were open but she was still lying placidly, head in my lap, her small body curled beside me on the couch.

"Thank you, doctor," I said. "Thank you so much for your time."

"Of course. I'll be here, waiting for your call. I know that you'll want to think this through, but, also, we need to act very soon. To have the lowest risk of sepsis."

"Yes. Thank you, doctor. I'll talk more with my husband and we'll call you back tonight."

Then I ended the call. Set the phone beside me on the couch. And sat there, stroking my daughter's hair. My husband and I would have to decide. It must have been awful for all those parents ... Amy, Vicky, Cal ... yes, I lost my friends. But I moved on. Found new playmates who'd log on when we had free time. But, their parents! Their children gone so soon.

We would ... Dr. Franklin *did* sound hopeful about the radiation therapy, didn't she? ... we would keep Claire a little longer yet.

My lower lip was quivering, but I tried to smile when I spoke. "I'm so sorry, honey. Your father and I, we have to take you to the hospital, we have to ..."

"I know, mommy." She pointed and said, "I cut my leg."

Such a lovely child!

My lovely child.

#

Strapped to the table, wearing the nylon gown, she says, "Mommy, I'm scared. Tell me a story?"

My husband squeezes my hand. I feel so drained, beneath the fluorescent lights this late at night. A story? All I could think of were fairy tales: a pill, a magic cream.

"Once upon a time, there was a brave, strong girl ..."

Frank Brown Cloud teaches creative writing at the Monroe County Jail and serves as director of the Indiana Prisoners' Writing Workshop, an offshoot of the Midwest Pages to Prisoners Project. His writing has appeared in *Stirring*, *The Coachella Review*, *The Offing*, and *the Journal of Cell Biology*, among others. *Brown Cloud* was educated at Northwestern, where he studied chemistry, economics, and creative writing (B.A. 2005), and at Stanford, where he studied physical chemistry and cellular biology (Ph.D. 2011). He received numerous grants for his scientific research but now devotes his time to advocating for the voiceless.

