

Honorable Mention, Non-Fiction

Disability

by Kristin Ruiz

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WEDNESDAY

In my dream, I was racing alone up a steep hill, but my legs started to swell and contort. I tried to regain my momentum, but my knees began to lock and I hobbled painfully, gritting my teeth, willing myself forward even as my body seemed to fall apart. I threw my hands to the ground and started to gallop like an animal. This helped for a little while, but my legs kept twisting and my body kept failing. Soon, I was dragging myself along the ground while my feet flailed behind me uselessly. I finally looked up from my pathetic struggle and realized there were people standing all around me, looking down in disgust and whispering to each other. I tried to call for help, but either my voice made no sound, or they simply did not hear. Avoiding my eyes, they drifted away awkwardly and I raged as they left me there, writhing, helpless and full of shame. I screamed hysterically until my voice gave out and then I screamed in impotent, furious silence. I woke with a slight start and stared fixedly at the ceiling, willing my brain to clear and my heart rate to slow. I must have dreamt that scene a hundred times now. The details sometimes change, but the gist is always the same. I rolled out of bed quietly and tiptoed to the kitchen for my third nighttime snack. I wasn't really hungry, but the ritual sometimes helped me fall back asleep. I grabbed a fork and dug into a bowl of cold spaghetti while standing in the middle of the kitchen glaring at the clock: it was 3:30am.

Today was going to be another long day. I could barely even think about it. I stuck the Tupperware back in the fridge and climbed back into bed while my fiancée snored peacefully next to me. Eventually, I drifted back to sleep for a bit before the alarm blared rudely at 6:00. It felt like my eyes had just closed, but I had to crawl back out of my bed and start my day. But four hours later, I had hit the wall. I was leaning on my elbow staring blindly at a notepad on my desk. I didn't even feel Carla watching me from her cubicle until she barked at me in her usual terrier way.

“Hey there, space cadet! How are you feeling?” she asked loudly.

A loaded question; I sensed a few nearby necks crane closer to hear my answer. The gossip must be pretty dull today.

After more than a year of being sick, I no longer felt capable of conjuring the right balance of optimistic lies and uncomfortable truths. *I feel sick and scared, thanks for asking. The doctors still don't know what is slowly destroying my body, or even if I will ever get better. But, they don't seem worried enough to remember my name, so I'm pretty sure it's not life-threatening. Yup, things are looking up, I guess. And how was your weekend?*

“Oh... I'm... I don't know. Hanging in there, you know. Not... bad. Did you get a haircut?” *Well done, Ace.*

“Well, you look like crap,” she stated, not to be deterred. “They know what's wrong with you yet?”

“Nope.” I stared vaguely at notes I had been working on and realized I couldn't read my own writing on most of the entries.

“Well, that is just ridiculous,” Carla declared. “You need to be calling those offices every day and asking why they haven't figured you out yet. Did you look up that TV doctor I told you about? I think he's one of Oprah's or something. He can diagnose any crazy thing out there. That is what you need, you know. You need to tell your doctors to call him.”

I yawned. “Okay. Thanks, Carla.” I hoped that would be the end of it.

She sensed the brush-off. “Well, fine. You didn't listen to me about gluten, either, I'll bet. But I'm looking out for you, at least.”

I managed a weary smile.

“Anyway,” she continued conspiratorially. “You need to watch your back. Some people, and I won't say who, have started a bet that you will be replaced by the end of the month. Garrett thinks you're going to blow your presentation on Friday, so you should try to pull it together.”

She reached over and patted my back like the great friend she thought herself to be, then flounced off to pry into someone else's life.

Stunned into humiliated silence, I just turned back to my notepad and tried to make sense out of my pharmaceutical brain fog. I pinched myself hard on the arm. *Focus*, I told myself. *You can do this. You can do this. Please, please, please focus.*

The abdominal pains hit shortly after lunch. I had to sneak out of a brainstorming meeting quickly before everyone witnessed what was to come. These disappearing acts were becoming more frequent, and my boss, Garrett shot me a look of strained sympathy mixed with mounting frustration as I quietly lurched out the door. By the time I got to my darkened office, sweat was pouring down my face and I could not walk one step further. I collapsed on the floor and tried not to hyperventilate. After almost ten minutes of blinding pain, I began to recover enough to get back on my feet and rush back to the meeting. I was lucky- that episode was a short one. Maybe I could slip back in without everyone noticing that I was missing... again.

I hurried back in to the meeting, shooting my boss a sheepish smile and a silent apology. He forced a tight-lipped smile back before looking away. I saw my colleague Angela catch his eye and give him a meaningful look. The meeting was wrapping up and the important decisions had already been made. Not only had I missed any chance to contribute my ideas, but now I had to find someone with the time and patience to catch me up on what happened.

I'd planned to stay at work late and catch up on my mountain of work, but I was desperately exhausted and shaky by the end of the day and I still needed to stop by the lab for more blood tests. Besides, an abdominal flare-up day could be highly unpredictable, and it was unfortunately best to lie down and drug myself half-conscious before the pains inevitably returned. By the time Luis got home that night, I was already in bed. He was getting used to this, but he looked a little disappointed.

"I'm guessing this means you're not up for happy hour?" he asked jokingly.

"Big surprise, huh? I wonder that I still get invited."

"Don't worry, they'll understand," he tried to assure me. "Our friends probably wouldn't recognize you anyway."

I stared at him.

"It was a joke," he said gently.

"It was a sucky joke."

“I know.” He snuggled in beside me and held me close. “Don’t feel bad. Everyone is rooting for you. They just miss you. They miss both of us.”

“You should go. Really, honey. I just need to rest. Go have some fun.”

He stopped me with a gesture. “It’s fine. I’m staying in because I’m tired. It’s fine,” he repeated. He made me a grilled cheese sandwich and left me to try to sleep. I took my two handfuls of nighttime meds before turning toward the wall and closing my eyes. My body begged for sleep, but my mind skipped wildly. I wondered which of my colleagues had bet against me keeping my job. I tried to imagine what it would feel to lose my independence, my future, and my hope. When Luis came to check on me later, I kept my eyes closed and let him think I was asleep. He kissed me lightly on the forehead and gave a little sigh.

THURSDAY

It was such a simple request, but it set my heart racing before I could even finish checking the rest of my morning emails.

Make time to come and talk with me today.

-Garrett

I took a long swig of my morning coffee and tried to stretch my back a little as I settled in for my day’s work. I had decided in the shower this morning that today was going to be a good day. Mind would triumph over matter and the spirit would dominate the flesh. I realized just how many inspirational quotes and empowerment mantras I had memorized in the last several months as I grasped for sense and hope from within a body that no longer worked. I had repeated every positive cliché in my arsenal during my morning drive, but this simple little email request had clipped my momentum.

I set a meeting with Garrett’s secretary for after lunch and then focused my attention on the all-important client presentation tomorrow. *One good day can do wonders*, I reminded myself. I ate lunch quickly at my desk and ran to a ladies room to touch up my appearance before the meeting. My confidence plummeted when I saw my reflection. I had felt almost attractive again when I left the house today in a flattering outfit, and my hair even looking cute for once, but one glance at the mirror shattered my delicate self-esteem. The hives that continually traveled

across my body lately had spread halfway down my face today. One particularly mean one had settled inside my left eyelid and the eye was now swollen half-shut. The make-up I had pancaked on this morning to give my skin the appearance of color and life was now cracking around my eyes, making me look about a decade older. My eyes were hollow and my lips were parched and cracked. Nothing I did seemed to make my lips look healthy anymore. Refusing to be derailed by vanity, I whipped out my cosmetics bag and attempted to spackle myself back into the picture of a living person before meeting my boss.

He greeted me kindly enough, but after exchanging the usual pleasantries, his face changed into that peculiar mix of pity and discomfort I knew all too well these days. I braced myself for what was coming.

“Kristin, I feel bad for what you are going through...” he paused a moment, trying to frame his words as I shifted anxiously in my seat.

“...but I need to know if I can count on you.”

“I know, Garrett. You can. You know my job is very important to me-“

“I know that,” he interrupted, a little impatiently. “I know you care and I know you are doing your best. But you have a big day coming tomorrow and how can I know that you will even be able to make it into work when we need you the most? Or that you won’t have to leave in the middle of it because of who knows what?” He finished a little exasperated and averted my eyes. He felt sorry for me. I hated this.

“I honestly don’t know,” I conceded. My voice wavered a little and I took a breath to steady myself. “I wish I could tell you what to expect and I wish I knew what condition I will be in on any given day. Or any given hour. I know that you have been inconvenienced and I know that you have supported me while I’ve been trying to work things out. I am so sorry this is affecting the team. I really am. But I promise you that I am doing everything my doctors and I can think of, and we *have* to be getting closer to an answer. And I am not going to let you down. I will make up for all of this.” I smiled reassuringly, but his eyes drifted over to the swollen left side of my face and he looked doubtful.

“Okay,” he finally said, obviously unsatisfied. “Just keep me in the loop, alright? And if you need help for tomorrow, you need to ask for it. Angela has already indicated that she can take on a bigger leadership role if you need her to. Just make sure your bases are covered in every way.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop,” I promised. I walked out of the office, determinedly not limping on my swollen leg, and passed Angela, lurking nearby and trying to look busy. She let out a dramatic little gasp when she saw me, loud enough to snare the attentions of passersby.

“Oh my gosh, you poor thing! How are you feeling today?” Her voice dripped with honey. I was already close to tears, so I tried for a quick exit. Predictably, she cut me off and blocked my way by hugging me awkwardly. I wondered if I had enough strength to throw her into the wall. “You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about your problems and I really feel like this is all just due to too much stress,” she announced.

I eyed her coldly. “It’s not stress.” I countered.

“Of course it is! Here you are planning a wedding, and still trying to adjust to a promotion you were obviously not ready for. You must be incredibly stressed out! Lots of people would be in your position.” She smiled. “Anyway, I think you should tell your doctors about that, because I’ve been watching you and I really think that your health gets worse when you have a deadline or a project or something. You poor thing.”

It was well-played for her audience. Nearby secretaries and interns nodded or whispered, sure now that the simplest answer must be the right one. The sympathy on their faces was probably real, but it still enraged me to see how eager people were to dismiss my uncomfortable presence with an easy label: *Of course, she just can’t handle the stress. It’s so sad how some people just can’t hack it.*

I was dangerously close to losing my delicate hold on my emotions when she turned and strutted away, practically skipping down the hallway as if to show off her glowing health and vitality. I limped to the bathroom, closed myself in one of the stalls and allowed myself five minutes of absolutely wretched self-pity. Afterwards, I scrubbed my face clean, ignored my reflection, and walked confidently back to my desk. When Angela stopped by to check on the status of tomorrow’s presentation for the umpteenth time, I threw her a big smile and said

everything was going great and thanked her for her genuine concern and constant interest in my health.

My experiment in optimistic denial had worked, to a point. But it had its price. By the time I dragged myself into my acupuncture appointment after work that evening, I was empty and my body felt broken.

“I don’t know what else to try,” my acupuncturist admitted a bit sheepishly after we had gone over my newest symptoms and she had examined me. “You have tried all of the dietary restrictions we talked about?”

Yeah,” I murmured, counting them off on my fingers. “Gluten, dairy, caffeine, processed foods, sugars.”

“And no change?”

“Not that I can tell.”

“Well, I really thought it could have been an allergy, but maybe not. Are you still using the hypo-allergenic products and natural soaps for your skin?”

“Yeah.”

“What about your doctors?”

I sighed. “Not much change. The allergist still thinks it could be an auto-immune disorder, but they have given me every test he can think of and we still don’t know anything.”

“Yes, but auto-immune diseases don’t always show up on tests, do they?”

“Apparently not. My rheumatologist is leaning more toward some sort of intestinal disorder because of the abdominal pains, though.”

“Oh? That’s promising, then?”

“Not really. The gastroenterologist told me that he couldn’t help me and told me to ask my primary for better pain pills.”

“And did you ask for the better pain pills?” she asked, just a little judgmentally.

“No, anti-depressants.”

“Oh.” She paused. “What else are you taking right now?”

I pulled out my ready list of prescription medications. I had finally compiled a written list of names and dosages because I seemed to have to answer this question a lot and there were

usually too many weird names to remember. Besides, it was depressing to list them all off out loud.

“Is this an anti-malarial?” she asked in surprise, pointing to a name on the list.

“Yeah, they’re terrible.” I admitted. “I threw up for weeks until my body adjusted to them, but we’re trying to wean me off the steroids because I’ve been on them too many times and I might be getting long-term side effects.”

“So instead of melting your bones, they are melting your brains now,” she mused.

“That’s surprisingly accurate,” I chuckled. My own laughter sounded weird to me.

A heavy silence hung in the air as she flipped through my chart again, grasping for some unexplored strategy to try next. She finally dropped the folder to her desk and tossed her hands in the air. “You’re getting worse,” she announced.

“Yeah,” I admitted, although it wasn’t really a question. I liked my acupuncturist. She may not have any better ideas than my doctors did, but at least she treated me like a human being. A tear slid down my cheek, then another. I had never considered myself much of a crier in my old life, but it seemed that all the rules were changing. So, apparently, I was a crier now. A sick, ugly crier. I was going to have to start traveling everywhere with tissues. I wasn’t even embarrassed by it anymore.

At a loss for any other battle plan, she focused the needle therapy on my energy and immunity. I left feeling a little better, but I struggled to drive home in the dark. My eye was almost completely swollen shut, my legs felt twisted in knots, and my exhaustion was reaching a dangerous point. I stumbled out of my car and limped up my driveway. The front door was locked, and as I pulled my keys back out of my purse, I suddenly noticed that my fingers were swollen and going numb at the tips. It was just too much. Luis found me a few minutes later slumped down on the porch, staring at my hands and sobbing. He didn’t even say anything; He just scooped me up and carried me inside.

The rest of the night passed in a chaotic mix of barely coherent scenes. I vaguely recall babbling hysterically to Luis about missing my client presentation. Had I missed it? Was it today? I remember floating in a bath of Epsom salts, chugging water as if I was on fire. I must have fallen asleep in the tub though, because the next thing I remember was climbing out of the cold water

and wrapping myself in every towel I could find. The last moment I remember was lying in bed, still wrapped in towels, and Luis was quietly looking down at me as he sat with me, rubbing my back. The look on his face was heart-breaking and I somehow knew it was my fault, though I couldn't remember why. Then the world faded to black.

FRIDAY

At the sound of my alarm, I stumbled violently out of bed, getting tripped up in a mass of towels around my legs. I was sweating heavily. "What day is it?" I blurted out shrilly.

"It's Friday, baby. You've almost made it," Luis smiled sleepily.

He was right. I struggled out of bed and into the shower... why did I still feel so dirty and hot?

He was shaking me back awake. "Honey, you really should get ready. You're going to be late."

What? I was still in bed? "I thought I was getting ready." I said, trying to blink the sleepiness away. Everything seemed so blurry today.

"No," Luis said anxiously. "I've tried to wake you up a couple of times." I noticed he was already dressed. "You've been grinding your teeth really hard. I swear it sounded like you broke a tooth." I suddenly noticed bags under his eyes. Was that new? I had never seen my fiancée look this tired before. But he leaned down and whispered words of encouragement in my ear and scratched my belly to try and make me smile. But I couldn't get myself together today. When he helped pull me out of bed, I immediately doubled over as a spasm of pain shot through my lower abdomen.

Oh God, please no. Not today.

I hobbled to the bathroom and turned the shower on to assure Luis that I was getting moving. But I didn't have the time for a shower and I couldn't even stand upright with the pain. It was worth the deception, though. He needed to get to work, too, and he wouldn't leave if he knew I was curled in a ball on the tile floor, gasping as waves of pain and nausea rolled through me. I dry-swallowed a pain pill, and it worked enough to get me back on my feet. I threw on the first clean clothes I could find and spent the entire drive to work praying that this episode would be the worst of today's unknown challenges. I was vaguely aware that my vision still seemed cloudy and I felt woozy from taking the pain medication on an empty stomach. I pulled into a parking space at work ten minutes late, but took the luxury of a desperate two-minute pep talk

before getting out of the car. With my head bent over the steering wheel, I begged my body to get me through the day. *Please be strong. You have no choice but to get through today, so suck it up and get in there. Now, woman. Move!*

I snuck into my office and realized I only had one hour until my presentation. I tried to go over my slides and check for any last-minute data fixes, but I still couldn't see very clearly and struggling to make out the letters was just making me feel panicky. Garrett popped his head in about ten minutes before the meeting. From his startled expression, I knew clearly what kind of impression I gave off. My hair was messily pulled back into a ponytail and I had no make-up on. My attire was messy and I was sweating as my swollen hands fumbled at my notes. I tried to offer a rousing smile, but it was too late to inspire faith from my beleaguered boss. He just looked disappointed and disgusted.

"Kristin, go home."

"No, Garrett, please." I begged. "I know I look a little messed up, but I've got this. I've worked on this account for months! Please, I've *got* this."

He just shook his head in defeat and walked out of my doorway. I took a deep breath and followed him to the meeting room. The client and his team were helping themselves to coffee and bagels while my team set up our materials. I gave the team a confident nod, but they just exchanged concerned glances. Butterflies thudded violently in my stomach and I fanned myself with my notes.

When I was introduced, I stepped confidently to my mark and smiled at my client; the crown jewel of my accounts. Somewhere deep inside, I could feel the familiar wave of pain rippling through my body. I resolutely ignored it. I could do this.

But suddenly, I became aware that someone was shouting my name at me and I opened my eyes to see Angela, who was cradling my head in her arms. How did I get on the floor? She noticed that I was regaining consciousness and announced loudly to everyone around us, "She's fine. Don't worry. Will someone take her out of here please? She'll be fine. It's just stress."

Before I could argue, strong arms carried me out through the reception area and into the brightly lit cubicle maze; craning faces and excited whispers followed in my wake. Reaching my

office, I finally felt aware of what was happening and I looked up in surprise to find that Garrett was the one who had carried me there.

I wanted to beg his forgiveness. Then I wanted to scream for all of the times I had to apologize for things I couldn't help. Then I wanted to confess every fear that was running through me.

Finally, I just croaked, "It's not stress."

Surprisingly, he chuckled. "I know." He sat me down gingerly in my chair and gave me a long hard look. "Angela will take over this account for now. You are going on medical leave."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off.

"No. You can't keep doing this and you can't make it up to me. I know you would if you could, but you can't right now." He paused and reached out to hold my hand. "Luis has been called. He's on his way to pick you up. You need to talk to HR soon, but you'll need to talk to your doctor first. Let me know what the plan is. In the meantime, we will find someone to cover for you."

I couldn't argue. I could barely even sit up. In a small voice, I finally whispered, "Garrett, I need this job."

He gave my hand a little squeeze. "No, you need to take care of yourself. But... I hope you come back after you find your answers." I wondered if he really meant that, but the room was spinning and I knew I might pass out again. I just leaned my head on the desk and waited for Luis to get there. When I looked up again, a nervous-looking temp was standing guard over me, and Garrett had slipped out, unnoticed.

Once he arrived, Luis helped me into his car and buckled me in.

"Where are we going?" I asked, still in a trance.

"To the hospital."

I looked at him miserably. "No. I'm done"

"You blacked out at work, Kristin. You don't have a choice. We need to get you checked out."

"But they don't know what to do with me!" I exploded. "They don't even care! Those idiots will run some expensive, pointless tests on me that have already been done a thousand times, and who knows if I will have the money to pay for the ridiculous bill since I might just lose my job!"

I was truly hysterical now, but I couldn't stop. "Who knows if I will even have insurance to cover this crap anymore? We are supposed to get married this spring and all I can think about is how sorry I feel for you! I'm trapped in my body, but you are trapped in a relationship with an albatross!"

I realized suddenly that he had pulled the car over and was listening patiently as I shrieked at him.

"I don't want to do this to you anymore! It's just so unfair! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, honey! Oh my God, I'm sorry."

He reached over and pulled me into a sudden, urgent hug. He held me there for a long time while I sputtered and grasped at his arms around me, wanting to both hold onto him as fiercely as possible and to set him free for good. Suddenly, I knew I would have to vomit. I flung open the car door and leaned out onto the pavement. He held tightly to my back and pulled the hair from my face and I heaved and moaned.

Finally, I had nothing left, and collapsed across the seat. He drove me slowly to the emergency room and threw the car in park before turning back to me and speaking.

"Don't ever say that to me again," he said calmly. "I love you and I want to marry you. Why would I promise to spend the rest of my life with you if I was only going to bail out when things get hard?"

I studied him without answering.

"This is life. Sometimes things go wrong. We don't always know what is going to happen and when our luck is going to change. But you need to understand this: we are in this together. Maybe things won't go as we planned. Maybe we will have to readjust our lives and find a way to make it work. People find a way, you know."

I looked doubtfully at the hospital entrance. He read my thoughts. "It's not pointless," he said testily. "You have to keep believing that there is an answer and we will find it. Maybe today will be the day they find why you're sick and you'll be on a treatment plan by tomorrow. Maybe you'll be back at work in a week. Maybe you won't ever be able to go back and we will have to look into getting some help. I don't know. But you owe it to me to keep trying. It's time you

learn to have some faith. And I am *not* stuck with you. I'm exactly where I want to be, so knock it off, you drama queen."

I laughed then, a full belly laugh that actually felt natural. In that moment as I took his hand, I felt myself let go. I took a breath. I forgave myself. I had survived another day. He had survived it with me. And maybe that was all that ever mattered.

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Writing about this event in my life has been extremely therapeutic. I've never written about my own experiences in this way, but this moment was the most frightening and somehow enlightening of my life so far. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share it.