sue the phlebotomist
Seth Cable

It's cold and early enough in the morning that neither of us can even think about food. My son leans on my right side, both his arms entwined around my own. The waiting room at the hospital is empty except for us, and has been for some time.

He needs to have some blood drawn, to see if he's been poisoned with heavy metals. The law states that he can't attend school unless he's been tested for poisoning. Of course, the outcome won't make any difference; even poisoned kids can attend school. But the knowledge must be compelled.

- Do you think Surgery Joe is here, Dad?
- I don't know. Probably, though, to tell the truth.
- If he is, I really hope we don't see him.
- I know. It'll be okay.

Surgery Joe is a family friend, who basically resides at the hospital. My cousin and I gave him that name when we were kids; even then he was always getting worked on in some way or another. I never know exactly what it is, but it always seems to involve his neck or his back. They installed some kind of window in the side of his neck, just below his jaw, where they can insert little cartridges. He once told my son it was an old NES and then laughed until he cried.

It's no surprise then, when after a few minutes we both hear his unmistakable humming reverberating from down the corridor.

- Dad?...
- It's okay. It's okay. You know... why don't you pretend you're asleep? Just close your eyes...
- Alright.
- Be still, and he probably won't even notice you're there.

There's only one song Joe ever hums. Since 1992, it's always been "End of the Road." Of course, he swears he's never heard of Boys II Men. Nevertheless, you can sometimes very rarely catch him whistling "Momtownphilly."

I pull out my phone and open my email. There's a new message from my daughter's piano instigator, about the unit she's recently damaged. It's irate, but generally complimentary, and for the next few moments I act as if they're the most engrossing words I've ever read.

- KE KE KE KE KE IS THAT KE KYOU THERRIL?
- Joe! Thought I'd find you here. But... shhhh... Nodge is asleep.
- KE KE KE KE KE OH KE KE KE WELL KE IT IS EARLY.WHY ARE YOU HERE SO EARLY KE KE KE THERRIL?
- Nodge needs to get a blood test for school. Heavy metals. Why are you here, though? How are you feeling?
- OH KE KE KE KE KYOU KNOW KE KE KE MY SACKS ARE KE KE FULL KE KE KE

73
- Ooooh. That's hard. I'm sorry to hear that. Are you —
- HE'S ASLEEP HUH KE KE IS HE?
- Yeah, this is still the middle of the night for him. Where is the desk phlebotomist, do you know?
  We haven't seen her for —
- HE'S KE KE KE CRYING KE KE HE'S TEARING UP THERE KE KETHERRIL KE KE IS HE HAVING KE KE A BAD DREAM?
- Oh! Oh no! Oh, it's probably just how dry it is in here, you know.
- KE KE NO KE KE KE IT'S KE KE VERY MOIST KE
- Humid? You mean? Maybe. I'm pretty dry, myself. Why are you up so early, though?
- KE KE NIGHTPEELING KE KE KE GETS ME UP KE KE KE VERY VERY EARLY
- Mmh. I'll bet. Hey, how's your sister doing?
- I KE KE HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN, KE KE KETHERRIL NEITHER KE KE HAS SHE
- No. No, I don't imagine she has. Give her my hellos when you see her, will you?
- KE KE THAT'S FUNNY KE KE THAT REALLY IS KE KE TOK TOK TOK TOK TOK TOK TOK

Upon Surgery Joe's laughter, my son's grip compresses my right arm so swiftly and tightly that I can't help but wince and emit a tiny cry.

- KE KE KE STRONG DREAMS KE KE IN A STRONG DREAMER KE KE KE IT WAS GOOD TO SEE YOU KE KE KETHERRIL

Without waiting for a reply, he turns and continues out the open door behind us. Before disappearing entirely, he calls out from down the hall.


When his humming has vanished entirely behind the whir of the heating system, my son buries his face in my side and asks:

- When will Surgery Joe die, dad?
- I don't think he's allowed to, buddy. At least, not anymore.

And with a loud crash, the stairs from the ceiling descend, and enters Sue the Phlebotomist, oblong head crowned with flames, nine arms encumbered with hooks and buckets.

*