

Unspoken

Morgan Springsteen

1,344 hours sounds like a long time... 'til you think... that's fifty-six days... which is eight weeks... which is two months. Two months... with surgery.

She was sitting upright in the hospital bed, working the long, slender needles purposefully when he opened the door, entering without a knock. He sat down in the hard rocking chair by her bed and held out the cup of crushed ice she had requested. She shook her head and continued to work at the yarn in her hands, her forehead crumpled in a concentrated stare.

"What are you doing?" he asked flatly.

"Knitting. What does it look like I'm doing?" She dropped a stitch and swore under her breath.

"Since when do you knit?"

"Didn't you hear? It cures cancer now."

He hated it when she said it. She would just throw it out there now and again, without hesitation or apology. It mangled him up inside every time that word crossed his mind. Cancer. Even now, sitting in a hospital room, knowing all of the statistics and all of the ratios, knowing perfectly damn well that she wouldn't get all better, he still didn't want to face it. If the surgery was a complete success, she'd have long enough to plan her funeral and to say her goodbyes. A sharp pain ran through him like a severed wire being dragged across skin, and he averted his eyes.

She kept knitting.

Silence filled the sterile, unwelcoming space. Above them, the fluorescent light buzzed a little and flickered. Classy, she thought, as she started a new line. There was a time, not long ago, when she would have quipped sardonically about the lighting, how it was hell on any patient's ego with what it did to your complexion; fuck, it was probably Hell itself. Now she knew what would happen. He'd take it to heart—probably tell her not to fret, that he'd take care of it. Then he'd leave, and he'd be gone for a long time, returning eventually with a lamp and an apology for the time it took and, as always, those eyes that looked on her with bitter resignation. She didn't know if she liked it better or worse when he was gone. She kept her mouth shut.

What's she thinking? He wanted to put his hand on her arm, stroke tenderly at the soft blonde hairs there, take her hand and tell her... tell her... tell her what? Tell her it would be all right? Cliché. Tell her it would be worth it for a few more months? Dismal. What do you tell the dying to make them comfortable, to make them receive their mortality with grace?

"Are you sure you don't want anything from the vending machine?" he offered pathetically.

She stopped moving her hands and looked at him for the first time in hours. "Does the vending machine serve single malt whiskey? That's what I want."

A joke. Always a joke. There was a time when he would have laughed at a joke like that. He would have retorted with something equally witty and seen that glimmer in her deep amber colored eyes. He shuffled his feet. "I'll check, but you might want to think of a backup plan."

She almost laughed at that. Speaking of backup plans... what's yours? There were so many things she wanted to ask him, tell him, scream at him, cry to him. "Just water."

He walked to the door, taking out his wallet as he went. He turned and looked at his wife of ten years, her dark brunette hair still gracefully framing her once angelic features, now withered by the inky blackness of her mortality, twisting its tentacles throughout her frail body. She had picked up the knitting again, the clack of the needles resonating in the soundless space. Stay and

hold her fucking hand, you pussy, he thought.

She stared fixedly at the scarf she would never wear, would probably never finish. She couldn't meet his eyes, though she felt his intent gaze on her. Stay and hold my fucking hand, you pussy, she thought.

The door clicked as he left.