**“Guts” by Kimberly King Parsons (**<https://electricliterature.com/aimee-bender-recommends-guts-by-kimberly-king-parsons/#article-main-74883>)

When I start dating Tim, an almost-doctor, all the sick, broken people in the world begin to glow. Light pours from careful limpers in the streets, from the wheezers and wet coughers who stop right in front of me to twist out their lungs. People I once found gross or contagious are radiant, gleaming with need. The newborn on my bus shines like swaddled halogen—harnessed to his tired mother’s chest, he turns his jaundiced little face toward me, no matter where I sit. I’ve always been a noticer, but this tug from the hearts and minds and ailing bodies of strangers—this is all Tim’s fault.

“How can you stand it?” I say to him.

We’re at the movies, in the very back row, the theater—I swear—full of hidden rashes and shriveled limbs. I tell Tim that even the Jesus screamer—the guy who paws through my garbage and sometimes shits on my front stoop—he is now incandescent, his eyes drippy with hope.

“It’s too much,” I say. “Beautiful, shattered people everywhere. Is this what it’s like to be you?”

We’re too early, as usual. Trivia and local business ads flash on the big screen. The movie Tim has chosen is a comedy, a mistaken-identity caper with a pug dog in a supporting role.

“Nah,” Tim says, and yawns. One of his eyes closes. “I turn it on and off.”

Tim is a week into his internal medicine rotation, and I have so many questions. I’d rather be sitting across from him at the Chinese place, dumplings on the way, listening to him talk about patient histories and lab data, about how best to deliver bad news. I want to absorb it all—the lining of every wrinkle in his brain. But Tim is too tired to eat, exhausted from being on call. He picks movie dates because when the house bulbs dim he can drift off. He thinks he’s got me fooled.

 “They’re all so fragile,” I say. I mean the strange heads in front of us, other people waiting for the lights to go out. “Well, yeah,” Tim says. His device vibrates in his pocket.

He takes it out and taps on it. “But unless I’m looking at somebody’s chart I don’t really think of them that way.”

Tim’s device flashes. He taps and taps. “Goddamn it,” he says. “Give me a second.” He steps into the aisle to call somebody important.

I’m wearing control-top tights over control-top underwear. With Tim occupied, I breathe a little deeper, take a break from sucking in.

An old woman enters the theater, staggers up the steps. She’s a bright spot in a lank dress, one arm bandaged at the bend. Loud blood beats in my ears. She’s every frail grandma, every elderly aunt I never visit, every maternal figure who has loved me in spite of my selfishness. I use my mind to help her safely up thesteps, all the way to Tim, who has finished his call. Authority teems from him, even without a stethoscope around his neck. The woman leans in close and asks him something, where is she, is this the right place? Tim gestures directions, waves her away. She starts down, afraid to push off from the handrail. She shimmers, the type of woman who makes you heart food from scratch, recites the recipe while you eat.

Tim comes back to his seat and sighs hard. “That lady’s dumb nose touched my glasses,” he says. He holds them out, shows me a smudge on the lens.

He’s tired, a little cranky, maybe. I get back to the heads. “Is it like being a hairdresser?” I say. “Like you have to separate yourself or you’d be tortured by people’s bad choices? Awful perms?”

“Maybe,” Tim says. He uses his device to search for reviews of the film we are about to see. He reads them aloud. Tim has a voice that sounds like everything will be okay. It’s a tone they must teach in med school.

“Rip-roaring,” he says. “Hysterical but with heart.” Tim starts breathing slow during the previews. He’s snoring a little by the opening credits. I lean into him, pose his hot arm around my shoulder. I put my hand into our bucket of slippery popcorn. I don’t tell Tim that I find movies in the theater confusing. The giant stars and their giant mouths are unsettling—the background actors unconvincing, living life with too much zeal.  But I like *going*to the movies. I like plush seats and frigid air, all the dark snacking.

When I lose track of the plot, I lean away from sleeping Tim and reach into my huge, floppy purse. I feel around for contraband, one of the secret tallboys I picked up at the gas station. Onscreen, a bank teller insults the leading man while the dog pisses on a potted plant. I look at the descending theater heads and some of them start to flicker. I see a tiny black tunnel spiraling through one guy, his brain tissue eaten away and peppery in places. I guzzle the tallboy through a car chase and a madcap karate fight. I watch the sick, sparkly heads and hope these people can make peace with what’s happening to them. I know there’s nothing to be afraid of—death is just a countdown to the calm—but I’m doing that thing where I can’t pull the oxygen from the air, where everything I look at gets smeary at the edges. I drink and drink and focus on the threads coming together onscreen. The leading man is vindicated. The pug wears sunglasses and drives a car, its little paws on the steering wheel. I pop tallboy two. Tim’s mouth falls open.

Tim moves through his rotations and I move along behind him, picking up shards of knowledge, trying to make sense of them. When he isn’t exhausted, he entertains my questions.

“Pretend I’m a first-year,” I say. “Leave nothing out.”

I want to know about lumbar punctures, so Tim touches my spine while I brush my teeth. He uses his finger to dig into my lower back.

“This is the spot,” he says. “Between L4 and L5. You draw a line from the iliac crest.”

I’ve seen the crest he’s talking about, that scooped bowl of bone on the hips of supermodels and centerfolds, but I’ve never seen mine. Tim is already dressed, a silver pen clipped to the pocket of his lab coat. He talks to my lumpy, naked reflection, raps his hard knuckle between my vertebrae.

“I’m amazed you can find a bone anywhere on me,” I say.

I spit white foam into the sink. Tim says spinal taps are easier to perform on infants because their bones are still soft.

“Like a needle into butter,” he says.

I shudder and ask if he’s afraid of paralyzing a baby.“Those itty-bitty bones!” I say. “Their wittle tiny backs! Whatif you mess it up?”

Tim tells me again he’s the best in his class—there were no white blood cells in his last spinal.

“They call it a champagne tap,” he says. “The chief resident buys you a bottle to celebrate.”

He looks at his hand on my back and frowns. “May I?” he says.

He pushes until his knuckles find the buried grooves in my spine. He works his fist up the column of bone, straightening me out as he goes. He rests his palm on the back of my neck, then braces his other forearm across my chest.

“What’s this, the Heimlich?” I say. It’s a rough kindness, this unexpected attention, and it flusters me.

Tim concentrates on shifting everything about me inward and upward. Once he’s satisfied, he holds me in place, backs slowly away. My reflection looms in the foreground. He has made the difference in our heights obvious. I’m so much wider than Tim and now I’m taller, too. He assesses his work, finishes with an upward tilt of his head, which I mimic.

“Better,” he says. “So much.”

“I know, I know,” I say, holding the pose.

“Don’t shrink yourself,” he says, serious. “Take up your space.”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” I say. “That, I’m great at.”

“Stop it,” he scolds. “Don’t put yourself down.”

He steps in front of me and turns off the water, uses one of his monogrammed hand towels to dry the basin.

“Look at you!” he says. “I like it.” Then, quietly, he says, “I like your size.” And suddenly it’s there, my size, this thirdperson in the room with us.

Then, quietly, he says, “I like your size.” And suddenly it’s there, my size, this third person in the room with us.

Tim looks at himself in the mirror and shows his teeth. The steam from the running shower fogs up his glasses. He takes them off and uses his lab coat to rub the lenses. I start to slouch.

“Quit holding your breath,” he says. “Don’t lock your knees.”

“There’s no way this is how real people stand,” I tell him. “It’s exhausting.”

“Good posture takes muscle memory and mental effort, both,” Tim says. “Use your brain until your body gets it.” Tim moves throughthe world like a human clipboard.

He goes to make the coffee, and I rush to take a shower. He says it’s better if we leave at the same time. “That way we can enjoy each other’s company in the car,” he says. I don’t have a key to his place.

Tim moves through the world like a human clipboard.

In the car Tim plays the classic rock station. He slurps coffee from his thermos and steers with his knees. He floats through traffic, catching every green light. It’s still dark when he drops me at my office. He parks head out in a handicap space and leans over me to open my door.

“Have a productive day, babe,” he says, and taps my nose.

“You, too,” I say. “Good luck with all the guts.”

The car rises when I get out. Tim turns up the radio and powers down the windows. I use my big purse to hide my ass as I walk away.

I don’t have a key to the office, either, so I go across the street to sit on the benches in the park. I eat a few bites of the toast Tim packed for me. He uses a plant sterol called Take Control! instead of butter. He says it’s scientifically proven to lower cholesterol in rats. It tastes like ChapStick
melted down. Eventually, I give up and throw hunks of bread at some birds. I peg one square in the chest, and it stands there, stunned.

*Your size.*

Tim is on a program of radical truth telling, and he says it’s setting him free.

Nobody else is around—no moms with babies, no joggers jogging—so I tie my hair back and take out my one-hitter. It’s another secret from Tim.

“Drinking is one thing,” he tells me. “But pot keeps people from reaching their potential.”

Tim is on a program of radical truth telling, and he says it’s setting him free.

I get a little bit high, watch the world wake up.

There’s a lit window at the Arby’s where a cute cashier once mocked me for my big lunch order, ruining the place forever. I wonder if it’s the same kid opening shop, if he’s the one up early, cleaning grease traps, pushing a mop around. So many places have been wrecked for me. One mortifying moment triggers all the rest. It starts with fast food and radiates outward, a map of shame. Usually these thoughts make me feel like I’m being pushed to the ground, somebody’s knee on my chest, but now I’m detached, each embarrassment an object resting in front of me, something to be picked up and weighed in my hand. That’s the weed working.

There’s the skating rink where a boy with fluorescent braces broke my teenage heart. There’s the jagged sidewalk where I rolled my ankle and some asshole called out, “Timber!” as I fell. There’s the public pool where I misinterpreted a friend’s intense stare, his fingers grazing my bare shoulder.

“It was a mosquito!” he squawked, my hand already on his underwater dick.

I keep reloading the one-hitter. It’s still so early. The weed I have is threaded through with little hairs. Colors start, everything gets pretty and crisp, exaggerated. There’s something about how pot releases pressure in your eyeballs. Tim would know. Warm light slides around for a while. I blow smoke, and pink clouds stream across the sky.

After a while the birds get beady-eyed and silent, suddenly judgmental, cocking their heads to see me from different angles. The sunlit trees are too leafy, overwhelming. Crickets get rowdy in the bushes, and for a second I think the hood of my jacket is a person looming behind me.

“People respect the truth,” Tim always says. I contemplate taping a note to the office door that says: *Got high. Got too high. Had to go home.*The birds finish my toast and then fly up and swarm with their friends, all of them swirling and looping into one big-ass bird.

When the coffee shop opens, I take a table by the window, lick lavender glaze off a doughnut. It’s sublime. I flip through free circulars and wait for nine o’clock.

Irene drags one of the lobby chairs up to my desk. I keep an eye out for Mr. Beezer, who doesn’t like chitchat.

“Are vitamins a waste of money?” Irene asks. She uses one of her business cards to pick her teeth. “Because I heard you just pee them out.”

She pulls a glob of plaque off the card, rolls it between her fingers.

“What about homeopathy?” she asks. “What does that even mean?”

I shouldn’t have bragged to Irene about Tim, how he’s a white-hot star being singled out for greatness in life.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’ll ask him.”

Irene puts her business card back in the acrylic holder on my desk. Irene’s cards are displayed behind Mr. Beezer’s. Ireneis Mr. Beezer’s assistant. When I’m not answering phones or greeting visitors or making coffee, I am Irene’s assistant.

The lobby is empty. A man’s overcoat is draped across one of the couches.

Mr. Beezer’s office door is closed and he’s turned his line to “unavailable.” Irene’s door is open. A steady stream of AM talk drifts from the plastic radio on her desk. I trace the outline of my hand on company stationery.

“Ear candling’s a joke, probably,” Irene says, and scrapes at her fingernail polish with my letter opener. She makes a pile of red flakes by my stapler.

Irene’s radio says, “Prices are slashed! Slashed! Slashed!” She bites at a hangnail. “Ask him about gargling with salt water, too,” she says. “I heard that’s a scam. I heard the salt people made that up.”

My pen is out of ink. I trace manic invisible circles on the message pad, the top of my desk, the back of my hand. The phone rings, and I recite the greeting script. Mr. Beezer says the person on the other end can hear a smile, so I smile. Irene keeps looking at her nails, but she mouths along and smiles, too, toothy and deranged.

“It’s for you,” I say, and transfer the call to her office. She stands up and breaks into an awkward gallop. It’s possible that Irene is slightly fatter than I am. She’s shorter, and though my thighs are definitely smaller, my waist is maybe bigger. Tim says the eye prefers a 0.7 waist-to-hip ratio—there have been studies.

“I could care less,” he’d said. “Or I couldn’t care less, whichever. I mean ratios don’t matter to me, obviously. It’s justa fun fact.”

*Obviously.*

It’s possible the eye prefers Irene, even if she’s bigger overall.

When Irene’s door closes I use one of Mr. Beezer’s cards torake the red slivers of nail polish into the wastebasket. I move the chair back into place and make my pass through the lobby, situating a disrupted nesting table and hanging the overcoat on a brass hook. I pluck fuzz off an ottoman.

Mr. Beezer wants the lobby to feel like a living room,  a place indicative of the homes he sells. Every morning, I float fresh rose petals in cut crystal bowls. I fluff throw pillows and spritz the room with cookie-scented air freshener. Unfortunately for Mr. Beezer, an office is still an office. The fluorescent light is harsh on the paisley wingbacks and brocade window treatments. The ceiling tiles are institutional. A copy machine dominates the north wall, its yellow extension cord trailing under the Oriental rug. My desk is the biggest giveaway, though I keep my wastebasket out of sight and hide my Kleenex box under a floral printed cover. It’s too bad the clients don’t see the room from behind my desk, where the perspective is slightly more convincing.

In the break room I rinse out coffee mugs in the sink.

Irene comes in with one of Mr. Beezer’s files.

“This wasn’t in the right place,” she says. “Not even close.”

“Oh, no,” I say. I turn off the water and dry my hands on my skirt. “I’m so sorry.”

Tim keeps telling me to stop being so sorry for everything all the time.

“I don’t apologize for anything, ever,” he says. And it’s true, he doesn’t.

Irene moves in so close the space between us is now charged, tight enough to be slapping space or hugging space. I can’t think of any recourse, so I brace myself for something unwelcome, whatever it is. All Irene does is cup her mouth and stage-whisper, “This caused us a lot of embarrassment. We looked extremely unprofessional.”

“Okay,” I say. “I didn’t realize.”

Irene shifts her weight and stares at me. Bright peach gloss congeals in the corners of her mouth.

“Look,” she says. “Your job isn’t only phones. Reception is more than that.”

I know what my job is. Irene knows I know what my job is.

“I see what you mean,” I say. There are only so many things you can say when you should be saying you’re sorry.

Irene puts the file on the countertop.

“Beezer is so far up my ass,” she says. She closes her eyes and squeezes the bridge of her nose. She sidesteps me and pours herself a cup of coffee, dumps in an avalanche of powdered cream.

“Just use your brain, please?” she says. She’s Irene again, aggressively friendly, helping me to be better.

“The first rule of filing,” she says, “is nothing comes before something. You should know that.”

“You’re right,” I say. “I should.”

Tim calls at lunch. I’m eating at my desk, a cheeseburger and fries in the open top drawer, stacks of Mr. Beezer’s files all around. I shoulder the phone, correct mistakes as I go along. “Meyer Realty Group” before “Myerson, Elliott” and “Park Vista Condominiums” before “Parker Estates.” Tim tells me the first-year anatomy students couldn’t find a cadaver with a uterus. He says four out of five women who donate their bodies to science have had hysterectomies.

“They have what’s called a blind-ending pouch,” Tim says. “It’s exactly what it sounds like.”

He tells me the first-years will have to complete their studies on female pigs. I lose my place in the alphabet.

“You’re kidding,” I say.

A stray piece of paper floats out of the file cabinet and onto the floor.

“No, it’s true,” Tim says.

The paper slips all the way under my desk, where I will have to crawl and smoosh myself around to get to it. *Fuck filing.*Just like that I’m done with administrative duties for the day. I merge the contents of two unrelated accounts and cram them into the cabinet. I drop the empty folder into the trash. I’ll shred everything later, leave no evidence.

“I mean, I could understand a monkey, maybe,” I say. “But this is ridiculous.”

Tim is quiet, and I can hear the hospital loudspeaker fizzing on his end.

“I’m just saying there are, like, implications.”

“Pig anatomy is really very close to ours,” Tim says. He sounds tired. “Nearly all major structures are the same.”

“But not exactly,” I say. “They aren’t exactly the same.” I shove thick stacks of files into the space at the back of the alphabet.

“Of course not,” he says. “But they have to take what they can get. Everyone is disappointed.”

We hang up, and I finish my food. I fish out every last fry from the warm, greasy bag.

Irene stands at the copy machine, backlit by a periodic flash. I’ve got a food buzz—my vision is gauzy.

I stare into the fluorescence of the lobby and imagine Tim among the first-year students. I picture him lifting sheet after sheet with growing disappointment. He catalogs the women by sight, moving between their open bodies.

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Mr. Beezer leaves early. I leave when Irene leaves. She takes the fat ring of keys from her purse and locks up while I wait behind her.

“Give me some room,” she says, elbows jutting.

“Have a great night,” I say when she heads to her car.

She puts both thumbs up and keeps walking.

I smoke on my way to the bus stop, past the spoiled Arby’s and Mr. Beezer’s dry cleaner, past Pegasus Plaza and a gross motel Timcalls the Sexual Asphyxiation Inn, where people are always throwing bottles of piss out the windows and setting each other on fire.

There’s a crust punk by the entrance, leaning against bulletproof glass. I pass him all the time, but now I noticehe has a cast on one leg. His toes poke out, wrinkled and covered in some kind of dark gunk. His eyes are milky. He shakes an amber bottle of pills at me, hisses a price. I fight the urge to give him everything in my wallet, to drop to my knees and sign my name on the plaster, dot my “i” with a little heart. He’s dazzling under the streetlights—so pitiful and pretty he may as well be wrapped in tinsel.

My bus runs in a loop—the population swells downtown. I’m killing time, waiting for Tim’s shift to end.

The aisles are filled with commuters holding leather straps. The turns are wide and everyone sways together. No one tries to sit on the sliver of seat next to me. “Keep it moving,” the driver says to the swarming rush-hour bodies.

A woman in a hairnet scratches her neck. A red patch slinks under her shirt collar, disappears at her ear, reappears on her cheek. Her skin is dry and coarse but not peeling. Eczema? Psoriasis? Tim would know. He would warn her against starch, against detergent and perfume. He would snap on a pair of latex gloves, spread her thick with antibiotic cream.

At Greenville Avenue, a delivery boy replaces the itchy woman. He looks through his orders and chooses a Styrofoam container, throws strands of some poor customer’s lo mein into his mouth. There is a faint mark, a white star, in the hollow at the boy’s throat. It’s a trach scar. If Tim had to, if things got desperate, he would use my Beezer Homes pen to reopen the star, save the boy from choking to death. All the bus people would applaud, insist on celebration. The driver would detour and double-park, hazards flashing. The crowd would carry their hero to the nearest bar.

The bus stops again, empties out. The delivery boy and I watchTim’s parade from the window. With everyone gone, there is only the sound of new air, wet and frantic, rushing through the boy’s throat.

I’ve missed happy hour by a long shot—everyone is drunk and in various states of collapse. It’s a dive, a last resort. The ceiling is tiled with license plates, and the bar taps are gear-shifts. A bald woman licks salt out of her palm and takes a shot of tequila, smiles at me through a wedge of lime.

I sit next to her and watch the reflection of her curved skull behind rows of liquor. She’s painted golden eyebrows onto her forehead. I wonder if there’s a wig in her purse.

The jukebox starts playing a song everybody knows, one that has its own dance.

“Come on,” the bald woman says, and pokes me in the arm. “Shake your shit.” She dances in place on the barstool, her little hands up in the air.

“Give me cheap,” I tell the bartender.

I shoot quick doubles, gin poured from the plastic bottle. I think of icebreakers, pleasantries, but the words fall away. The bald woman and I don’t talk, but we are sharing space now, getting to where we’re going. She lights little books of bar matches, burns them down, and shakes them out. My ass is aching—there is no barstool suitable for it— but the drinks are helping, like when your eyes adjust to a dim room.

“What kind of cancer do you have?” I ask.

“Excuse me?” she says, and looks behind her, like I’m talking to somebody else.

“I mean, obviously, right?” I say to her.

“What a fucking question,” she says. She talks around the matchbook in her teeth.

“It’s not lung, is it?” I ask. “Can I see your fingernails? Have they overrun your cuticles?” I glance at the woman’s hands on the bar top. She draws them into little fists. “Are they spreading around the edges and meeting on the other side? Is your urine gray?”

“Ha,” the woman says. “No.”

She shakes her head and fumbles with the matches. She strikes one and lets the whole book go up. Her face is terrible in the flash.

“I’m interested because I’m a doctor,” I tell her. “I’m amedical doctor, so these things interest me.”

“Well, shit,” the bald woman says. “A doctor.”

“I’m a heart doctor,” I explain. “But I treat cancer patients, too. There’s a lot of overlap.”

“Cardiologist,” the bald woman says. “You’re a cardiologist.” She laughs.

“Yeah,” I say. “Yep. What about you?”

“I’m on disability,” she says. “I do what I want.”

“Amazing,” I say. “Enjoy it.”

Down the bar a man is slumped over, sleeping.

“Surgery, surgical procedures,” I tell the woman. “I’m a doctor.”

“Right,” she says.

“It’s really rewarding,” I say. “It’s a rewarding career.”

“I don’t think I’d have the stomach for it, personally,” she says. “For cutting people open.”

“Part of the job,” I say. “Gets to be routine. Like a doorman opening a door.”

“Sounds like you’ve got every little thing figured out,” she says.

She flashes fingers at the bartender. Her wrists are delicate things. A neon sign casts her fine collarbones in blue light. If it weren’t for the woman’s head, she could be a model. I asked Tim once if there were any hot cadavers, any beautiful bodies who donated themselves to science.

“That’s sick,” he’d said. “You’re sick.” But he had laughed a little. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous of dead people now, too.”

The bartender pours our round slow and loose—runoff pools on the bar. Carpal tunnel, maybe.

“Bone cancer,” the woman says when the bartender is out of earshot. “But it started in my pussy.”

“Oh, bone?” I say. “That’s no problem.”

The woman slaps both her palms on the bar top, shaking caddies and highballs, scattering salt into her lap.

“Is that so?” she says, and hoots. The sound comes from behind her head, from somewhere else. She brings up her drink in a toast. “In your opinion, bone cancer’s no big deal?”

“That’s right,” I say, and clink the lip of the woman’s glass.“In my professional opinion, you’re going to be just fine.”

Tim tells me doctors make the best lovers. “It’s anatomy,” he says. “It’s just knowing where things are.”

He tells me this during my breast exam. He wears his little white lab coat. I’m high and naked, and Tim is thorough, slow, his glasses off.

“Let’s see what else we have,” he says, and gets down on his knees. His face is so small next to my body.

He inspects me an inch at a time with his hands, his mouth. He moves up my thighs.

“You’ve got a lot of ground to cover,” I say.

“Don’t start,” he says.

He spreads me apart and points out markers. He says, “This is the labium majus . . . and the minus.”

He describes me in words I’ve never heard before— some that sound good and some that sound horrible, like poetry or caught phlegm, depending. It’s the hairy weed that’s freaking me out, making everything sinister.

He describes me in words I’ve never heard before— some that sound good and some that sound horrible, like poetry or caught phlegm, depending.

Tim touches my cervix with his finger. I know it’s my cervixhe touches because he gets excited and tells me, “This is your cervix, Sheila.”

“Okay,” I say. “Enough.”

But he doesn’t stop. He continues to chart me, pushes upward until I feel something in a strange place, a place that hasn’t been or shouldn’t be touched. It’s impossible, what he does with his hand. He says the word “vault” and then, softer, the word “vestibule.” I think of the space between two closed doors.

When he’s finished with me, Tim goes to the sink. There are twenty-eight planes of the hand, and Tim washes all of them. He’s told me over and again what the parts are, but I can never remember—the four sides of each finger, the tops of them. The palm is divided into three sections, maybe. There are dorsals, flexors; the words tumble out too quickly. “It’s rote at this point,” Tim says. “I don’t even think about it.”

I stand at the sink behind him, as straight as I can manage. “I like watching you do it.”

“It’s just how we scrub in,” he explains.

When I wash my hands, I count, too. I get to twenty-four, maybe twenty-six planes. I’ll never figure it out. This is how you make someone love you—you teach them something memorable about something boring, something they must do every day for the rest of their life.

“When you leave me,” I tell Tim, “I’ll be stuck with wet hands, counting forever, getting it all wrong.”

A man pukes blood in the lobby. It doesn’t look like blood, but blood doesn’t look like blood when it’s in puke. Blood looks gritty, like coffee grounds. I don’t tell the man this when I bring the box of tissues over from my desk. This is my chance to be a calming presence.

The man’s wife holds my wastebasket under his dripping chin. They are newly married and building their first home. The wife says it’s possible nerves are to blame.

When black liquid begins to come out fast, the man stands up and spins around, trying to outrun the problem. He covers his mouth with his hands, but instead of stopping the flow, he pressurizes it. Irene, who is sweetly correcting herself for something in Mr. Beezer’s office, steps out in time to see the pukey projection, the distance. She stops in the doorway, her hands in her hair.

“Oh my God,” she says.

I should love my body more. It carries my soul around, lets me taste food and get high and come, and it never pulls shit like this.

I should love my body more. It carries my soul around, lets me taste food and get high and come.

The man and his wife will have to reschedule. The wife apologizes before pushing her husband through the double doors. His crumpled black tissues trail through the lobby.

“Sheila,” Irene says from the doorway, “something has to be done about this.”

“I know,” I say, and watch the black circles seeping into the throw pillows, ruining the rehearsal home.

The lobby is an extension of me, and I am an extension of Mr. Beezer. There isn’t really a way to prepare for something like this, to clean up something that belongs inside someone else. I am composed, collected, handling the situation.

Tim tells me he wants to spend the night alone.

“Can I put my panties on before you kick me out?” I say.

“Funny,” he says. He kisses me, but it’s perfunctory. He yawns. “It’s been such a long day.”

“It’s so early,” I say.

He tells me a patient his group has been following was lost forever under deep anesthesia.

“Jesus, that’s awful,” I say. “Do you want to talk about it?” I touch his hand, turn toward him in bed.

“It was a fluke,” Tim says. “Nobody’s fault.” He says he learned a lot: how to pronounce time of death, how to fill out morgue forms.

“The paperwork is insane,” he says. He fluffs his pillow,flips the blankets down on my side to let me out.

A sad sigh comes out of me before I can stop it. “Babe,” he says. “Everything’s fine. But I need to recharge.”

“Can’t I help you relax?” I say. I hate the desperate catch in my voice, the frantic feeling I get when he needs space. “No talking, I swear. I’ll read over here.”

I pick up one of his textbooks, flip to a full-color spread of warts on a foot. I sit at his desk, switch on the reading lamp.

“You don’t want to read my derm book, babe,” he says. “Trust me.”

“You really want me to go?” I say. I stand up and put my dresson slowly, dramatically buttoning each button to give him a chance to reconsider. He doesn’t. I wad my tights into a ball and shove them into my purse.

“I guess I’ll go out drinking,” I say. I’m picking a fight.

“Drink if you want, read if you want,” Tim says flatly. “Just not here, okay?”

I ask again why he’s even with me.

“Because you’re so independent,” he deadpans. I feel my face fall. He gets out of bed, wraps his arms around the biggest part of me. He’s sorry, in his way.

“You’re funny, for one thing,” he says. “Funny equals smart.”

“I’m no M.D.,” I say. I let myself sink into him, try to store this feeling for later. “I’m no R.N. or EMT. I’ve got none of the letters.”

“There are lots of different types of intelligence, babe,” he murmurs into my hair.

“That’s something smart people say to dumb people,” I say.

The world tilts and all is gray and churning, silvery bile. The bartender is stern, mad at me for something. I move through the bar like a sow on roller skates, people part the way. A pretty girl with a lazy eye holds open the bathroom door for me, and I duck under her arm, grateful.

I shutter myself in a stall and slam down on the toilet. Something cracks in the tank behind me, and there is a sound like water spraying somewhere inside the wall. *Oh, well.*Even when I’m sober, I don’t have the quads for hovering.

The spins don’t feel circular to me—there’s a kind of visualstutter, a section of the bathroom stall that keeps rewinding. It’s more interesting than nauseating, but I have to grab on to the sanitary receptacle box to steady myself. The box is cold metal, jutting out into the stall. Some wrongheaded curiosity compels me to lift the lid and look inside. It’s soaked tampons and pads, exactly what I expected, all the way down to the smell.

The door swings open and music rushes in. Clicking heels and water running in the sink, women talking about a man. Then one of them is pushing on my stall, the door creaking open. Even shit-faced, I raise my leg automatically, foot out quick to snap the stall door closed.

“I’m in here!” I say.

The woman says, “Sorry, honey!” and backs away.

My bar reflexes are supreme, something to behold. *Atta girl,*I think.

I’m not sure if it’s the crack of my beer tab or the scattered laughter that stirs Tim awake. This is a makeup date, Tim’s treat. It’s a gross-out comedy, guys who slap each other’s dicks and lose a suitcase full of money. There’s a subplot where a teenager tries to get laid, has diarrhea. I’m good and drunk in the dark theater.

It’s crowded, a sold-out show. There are tumors growing in almost everyone, too many to count. If it isn’t cancer, it’s somecardiovascular mishap in the works: there’s yellowy gunk building up in one guy, a cholesterol boat ready to sail into his bloodstream. But I’m looking past the glow, letting giant idiots entertain me. I know that for each head that twinkles thereis one waiting to light up. Months or years from now some spark will catch and flare. It’s too much to keep track of.

Tim’s eyes fly open. He takes one look at an overflowing toilet onscreen and titters along with the rest of the audience. There’s a jump cut to an angry woman in lingerie, trapped in the trunk of a car. People crack up, slap their thighs. Tim has zero context but busts out laughing anyway. He leans over, elbows me a little, makes sure I’ve caught the joke. And I want to believe him, I do. That he knows exactly what’s happening, that he’s been right here with me the entire time.

I take the bus in circles, pass Tim’s stop over and over. Each time the bus driver could break the pattern, leave the loop and go somewhere else, but he never does.

“We’re not on a track,” I shout. “We’re free to move about the city.”

A lady across the aisle from me takes her baby and movesto a seat in the back. I close my eyes and let the side of my face smash against the window. Elm Street, Malcolm X, Fair Park. The bus stops and stops.

I see the hospital. “My friend has bone cancer,” I yell to the driver. “Let me out.”

The bus door opens and sidewalk rushes up. I sit on concrete for a while, wait for my second wind.

The revolving door is a bitch. The elevator buttons make no sense.

“This is a pressing matter,” I tell the skinny nurse behind the counter. I put my palm on the open book in front of her. “Pressing.”

The nurse says Tim’s name over the loudspeaker. When he comes to the front, she shrugs. He walks toward me, sees what the fear is doing to my face.

“She can’t be here,” the nurse says.

“I’ve got it,” Tim says to her.

The nurse says, “She gotta go. You want me to get the doctor? She gotta leave.”

 “Donna,” Tim snaps, “relax.” The nurse puts her hands on her hips, walks back behind the counter.

Tim steers me down the hall. He takes me to the call room and closes the door behind us.

He says, “What are you doing here?”

In a panic, I ask him to find my liver. “It may be enlarged,” I say.

“Did you take something?” Tim says. “What did you take?”

“Crust punk pill,” I say.

“What?” Tim says. “What did you say?”

“This is your bed?” I collapse on the bottom bunk. “It’s like camp,” I say. “Camp Cut-You-Up.”

“You’re drunk,” Tim says.

“I’m lots of things,” I say.

“You can’t be here,” Tim says.

“Do other people sleep here with you?” I ask. “Female people?”

“What are you talking about?” Tim says.

I say, “There’s something wrong with me, you know. *Internally.*”

Tim sighs and lifts my blouse. He pushes on my gut. “You’re fine. No abnormalities.”

He looks straight ahead and palpates, does that thumping thing doctors do. He tells me he can’t feel anything.

“You’re sure,” I say. “You don’t feel anything . . . off?” I’m getting belligerent. My voice is so loud.

“Sheila, stop,” Tim says. “Here.”

He puts his hand over mine and moves it along my body.

He pushes me into myself. “Your bladder,” he says, “no lumps, no masses.” He moves my hands around behind. “These are your kidneys,” he says. He presses my fingers in, makes sure I can feel the edges of what he describes. “Okay?” he says. “Okay?”

“Please,” I say. “Only you can help me feel better.”

Tim stands up and looks at me. He locks the door. He takes off his glasses, rests them on a little table. He pushes me back on the bed, pulls my blouse open. I let myself be posed, positioned. He tugs my skirt off, my tights, frees me from my enormous bra. He crouches with a knee on either side of me.

“Here,” he says. He puts his face deep into my cleavage, pushes my tits up and around his ears.

“Yes,” I say, “yes.”

At the same time, his fingers are moving inside me, his hand.

“Your ovaries,” he says. He presses his little ear flat against my chest. He listens.

“Your heart,” he says.

“Find more,” I say.

**About the Author**

Kimberly King Parsons is the author of the short story collection *Black Light* (Vintage). She is a recipient of fellowships from Columbia University and the Sustainable Arts Foundation, and her fiction has appeared in the *Paris Review*, *Best Small Fictions*, *No Tokens*, the *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere.

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