

---

# THE ONES

MICHELLE TOMASSI

I didn't ask her to accompany me here to Dr. Sheraton's office, but she insisted on being "the one." I would have asked Dennis, Ma—hell, even my sonofabitch stepfather, Larry—but Emma volunteered to hold my hand and wipe my tears and tell me everything will be *okay* when in reality it's all a lie. I'm standing in this godforsaken waiting room because they would only tell me the test results in person, which can only mean one thing: I'm a goddamn goner.

I'm not gonna lie—I should have seen this coming. It started with the headaches; mild at first, like when you haven't eaten for a while and your brain starts to hate you for being such a lazy asshole and not getting off the couch to feed yourself. That only *really* happens when Ma's too busy to go shopping, because she has to leave Jersey and go to New York for business meetings. Or when Dennis and his friends clean out the food supply after one of their Call of Duty marathons, like *they* were the ones coming off the battlefield. The one time I tried to be a good son and restock the fridge, good ol' Larry yelled at me for only buying Totino's Pizza Rolls and Oreos.

Anyway, the headaches eventually got worse. Some-

times, I would be sitting on my bed, watching *Friday Night Lights* with Emma, when all of a sudden I'd feel the blow. I remember the first time it happened—it was like my head was caught in between the closing doors of an elevator. One minute, Coach Taylor was having one of those heart-to-hearts with the football team, and the next I was curled up, knocking over the bag of chips that was sitting in my lap. Emma *begged* me to see a doctor after the first time, but there was no way in hell I was gonna do that. No—I just kept having those god-awful headaches, blaming it on "the stress of college applications" or some other shit that the school guidance counselor would probably say.

Well, Emma finally got her wish. I was in the grocery store with Larry, walking behind him as he pushed the cart along, saying something about how "real men buy groceries." His designer Kmart jeans were slipping lower and lower down his butt, giving a show in the frozen food aisle that none of those customers had asked for. I rubbed the back of my neck as I started to feel the brain pain, but instead of reaching into my pocket for the Excedrin, I found myself stumbling away, no longer following behind Larry. It's like I was

---

playing Mario Kart on the old Nintendo and my car was heading straight for a wall, but no matter how hard I tried, the controllers seemed to be frozen. I just raced closer and closer to one of the glass doors until I *slammed* into it, falling backward and hitting my head on the tile floor. It all went black pretty quickly, but I do remember a middle-aged woman shrieking for the Lord, followed by the sound of Larry yelling for someone to call an ambulance.

---

When I woke up, Emma's face was practically pressed against mine, as if I were one of those dead-looking fish at the aquarium, and she was staring at me through the glass tank. She was probably jealous that *she* wasn't the one with me when I finally went down—I could just imagine how much she'd *love* to make a scene and yell, "Somebody call 911! My boyfriend has fallen and he can't get up!" Okay, maybe she wouldn't go all Life-Alert on me, but you get the point. Emma's the kind of girl who really does care, but for some reason she feels the need to make a spectacle of caring. She started blabbering immediately about how *worried* she was and described all the tests that the doctors planned on doing, but the whole time I wasn't really listening. I was too focused on the papery fabric covering my body: the hospital gown. It was baby-blue, with these tiny white polka dots and white trim on the edges of the sleeves. I reached behind me and felt around for them: the strings keeping it all in place. My neck suddenly felt itchy—god, it felt like I couldn't *breathe*. The only thing holding me together at that moment seemed to be those two pieces of string.

The docs wouldn't have my test results right away, so

they sent me home. Emma had folded up my clothes all nice and neat, the way Ma usually does it, and brought them over. She opened her mouth—probably to ask if I needed any help, like I'm some kind of baby—and I shook my head before she could say a word. "Okay, then." Those brown eyes of hers waited for me to change my mind. When she saw that I wouldn't budge, she left the pile on the edge of my bed, and walked backwards toward the door. "I'll let you have some privacy."

It's pretty funny when you think about it; the girl has seen me butt-naked on several occasions, yet she always leaves the room if I need to change. Like, she'll be a riot in bed, and then once it's time to return to the real world, she's suddenly a saint. Once she dragged herself out of the room, I stripped off that god-awful gown, but as I pulled on the jeans, I imagined them being replaced with one of those paper hospital outfits—for *good*. The thought of it all made me want to check out before they even assigned me to their terminal illness of choice. I would be strapped to a hospital bed for god knows how long while another stupid nurse would inject medicine into my bloodstream, and my hair would fall out and I'd be forced to read pathetic get-well cards from the Hallmark store while being fed my lunch through a tube. I don't need anyone's sympathy. No—I couldn't sit through all that. They would have to *kill* me before I put on one those ridiculous outfits again.

---

When I got the call from Dr. Sheraton a few days later, I let it go to voicemail. The thought of getting my death sentence by phone was just a little *too* person-

---

al—I would have preferred if he sent it in the mail, like Ma’s subscription to *Woman’s Day Magazine*. After all, I think I have a right to decide.

- Yes! Send me a year’s supply of chemotherapy, at the low rate of YOUR ENTIRE LIFE SAVINGS!
- No thanks, I’ll wait until I’m 40.

As Emma loved to remind me, however, I didn’t have time to wait.

“Put it on speaker, Jake.” I’ll be honest—if Emma hadn’t forced me to listen to the message with her, there’s a chance I would have just deleted the thing myself. I located the speaker button, but my hand felt frozen again—almost like my body did in the grocery store during my “episode.” I reached for my neck. Hopefully Emma didn’t hear my heart beating so loudly.

Oddly enough, Dr. Sheraton had the kind of voice that made you want to cry: it was firm and important, but so goddamn beautiful.

*Hello Jacob, this is Dr. Sheraton from West Greenberg Hospital. I am calling to inform you that your test results are in, and I would like to discuss them as soon as possible. Please give us a call back as soon as you get this message. Thank you.*

I would have driven there myself, but Ma insisted I bring someone with me, probably in case I passed out or something. She would have come herself, but Ma’s the type of person who doesn’t like to cry in public—after Dad died, Dennis and I practically had to drag her to his funeral. It wasn’t easy, but then Dennis actually

*screamed* at her—I had never seen the kid so angry. Ma hates being yelled at more than she hates crying, so eventually she got out of bed and forced herself to say goodbye to Dad for good.

Dennis would have probably agreed to come with me—but would I really want him sitting there, as he learns that his big brother is also leaving him for good? Not only did the kid have to lose a father, but now *me*? I taught him how to make a three-pointer every time, my fool-proof parallel parking method, and how to talk to girls without sounding like an ass. The key is to throw in a lot of compliments—tell them that their hair looks nice, or that you like their scarf (girls are *always* wearing some kind of scarf). If I’m gone, who’s gonna help him out? *Larry*? That dipshit kept apologizing after I got home from the hospital—what, did he think that he was the one who caused me to pass out in aisle 9? Larry’s about as exciting as a piece of asparagus, but that doesn’t mean I’d voluntarily crack my head open out of boredom.

“I’ll do it.” Emma straightened up on the couch, locking me in with those brown eyes of hers that first got me a year ago. “I’ll be the one to take you.” She started to tear up a little, like she was auditioning for some sappy *Lifetime* movie. I didn’t argue with her—with Emma, there’s really no point. The girl may drive me insane sometimes, but she sure as hell knows how to hold her ground.

---

The waiting room outside Dr. Sheraton’s office makes it kind of hard for me to breathe. The air almost *feels* sick, and not a single face looks up when Emma and I

---

walk in. Guess I'm just another dude joining the terminally ill club.

There's a row of frames on the back wall, and in them are motivational phrases written in that flowery Hallmark font. One says, "Every day is a second chance" and another one says, "The struggle you're in today is developing the strength you need for tomorrow." How do they know what my "struggle" is like? Plus, I can't even think about what's going to happen in a few hours, let alone tomorrow.

Aside from the offensive wall décor, the waiting room itself isn't terrible. There are rows of chairs with brown leather seats on the far ends of both sides, with a rectangular coffee table placed in front of each row. Funny thing is, I don't see any of those typical waiting room magazines sitting on them. Not even *Women's Day*—good thing Ma's not here, I guess. Maybe they really do just want us to sit here and wait.

In the middle of the room are couches, in that same brown leather, just two of them placed back to back. There are two little plants placed near the armrests on both sides, and they're actually pretty ugly—green and leafy with big yellow spots. They probably did that on purpose—the yellow spots are almost the same color as the yellowish walls trapping us all in here. It's not a happy yellow at all—more like the phlegm that Larry coughs up into the sink and "forgets" to rinse off. That's one thing I won't miss if I'm stuck in the hospital for good.

"Let's check you in," Emma announces, hoping that someone will look up and notice that we have arrived. I let her tug my hand and lead me to the check-in desk

on the right side of the room, right next to the door that reads, "William P. Sheraton, M.D. Neuro-Oncology."

"Name?" The woman behind the desk asks the computer, as if I'm actually behind the monitor and not standing directly in front of her. While Emma starts handing over all my information, I lean my elbow on the desk and look around. Bad mistake.

You've got these patients, see, who are sitting on the couches, on the chairs, or standing up by the windows. They're all staring off somewhere, like their minds are itching to get out, but their bodies have already given up. And then next to each sickly person is "the one" who was forced to bring them to this appointment. Okay, "forced" may be too harsh. Obviously no one wants to be here, but at least the ones are trying. Someone needs to try.

After Emma checks me in, she grabs my hand again and pulls me to the opposite side of the room, beelining for the two empty chairs at the end of the row. I was kinda hoping to pop a squat on one of those couches, but leave it to Emma to strip me of any freedom I thought I had left. Emma takes the chair at the end of the row, closest to the restroom. Emma doesn't like to tell many people this, but she has some bladder issues, especially when she's nervous. I remember on our first date at Maria's Trattoria, she got up a total of seven times to "wash her hands" or "ask for more napkins" or "call Mom to feed the cat." No matter how many times Mother Nature called, she always had an excuse ready. It's part of the reason why I asked her on a second date.

---

My ass barely touches the seat and Emma's already up, making her way to the bathroom door. With her gone, I look down the row of faces next to me. There's a tall man at the far end, probably in his 30s, with his elbows on his knees and his head bending down, like he's praying or something. He has a pretty good-looking woman next to him—wavy blondish hair, not much makeup (she doesn't need it)—and she's got her hand resting on his back. And you won't believe this—she's pregnant. Not only does she have to be “the one” for him, but she's gonna be a single mom soon. Jesus Christ.

Next to the pregnant lady are twin boys, identical, and I honestly can't tell who's the patient and who's “the one.” They're pretty pale, and they've got their eyes closed. From here, it looks like they're holding hands.

There's an old woman sitting to my right—she's got this tan skin that's wrinkled, like a paper bag, and a nice and colorful scarf. She's not wearing it around her neck like all those chicks at school; she's got it wrapped around her head, maybe to cover the baldness. But the seat next to her is empty. Where's “the one” for her?

“He killed himself when I got my diagnosis.”

I jump in my seat; Emma's back from the bathroom, smoothing out her leggings and tucking them into her Ugg boots for the fiftieth time today. I turn back to the woman, but she's not even looking at me. Her eyes—this turquoise color, matches her scarf—are just staring straight ahead.

“I knew he was gonna do it eventually, but I thought

he'd at least wait until *I* died first.” She grabs the back of her neck and breathes out. “That bastard always had to beat me at everything.”

For some reason, I feel my eyes starting to water a little bit. This woman's husband just killed himself and left her alone? I mean, Dad did the same thing to Ma, but at least *she* wasn't dying of cancer. At least she had a second chance.

“What's your diagnosis? How long do you have? Have you even *tried* the hospital food?” They cross my mind all at once; I'm not even sure which one I say out loud. “Doesn't matter.” She looks at me for the first time—she's old, no doubt about it, and she looks like she wants something. “I'm gonna tell the Doc that I don't wanna do his treatment. If I'm gonna die, let it be in my own goddamn bed.” She pauses, and looks slightly behind me. “That your girlfriend?”

I turn around. Emma's still sitting there, looking at me like I'm back in that hospital bed, waiting for me to wake up. I look back at the older woman and nod. She nods in return, making sure I understand that yes, Emma is my girlfriend.

“Jacob Manning?” A nurse is standing outside Dr. Sheraton's office with a clipboard in her hands, wearing baby blue scrubs and tapping her New Balance sneaker impatiently. Emma's up on her feet before I can even blink, and for some reason I can't get myself to move. The thought of getting up and leaving this woman sitting next to not one, but two empty seats is just too much.

The old woman looks up at me, probably wondering if

---

I'm deaf or too stupid to know my own name. Like an idiot, I just keep staring at her, opening my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

"Jake, come *on*." Emma's not tugging at my arm this time, but I think she's as freaked out by this person as I am. I get up and look at the woman one last time. Her head is down, but I'm pretty sure she's smiling.

I lift my hand to rub my neck, but somehow I end up taking Emma's hand instead. It's the first time I think she might actually cry.

"It's fine," I mutter. "Imagine being *that* woman."

"What woman?"

Emma stops and looks behind her, as if she's expecting someone to be following us. I roll my eyes—now is *not* the time to be dramatic.

"You know, the woman who was just next to me." I turn around to point at her.

The old woman's chair is empty. There's not one, not two, but three empty seats in a row, waiting to be filled.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

*I would like to thank Professor Suzanne Berne for encouraging me to publish this piece, and for all of her help in the revision process. Additionally, thank you to all of my classmates in Professor Berne's Fiction Writing workshop. Your insights and advice were truly appreciated, and I have become a better writer as a result.*