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FIELD NOTES | FALL 2019

## **Stroppy Sevens**

By Trisha K. Paul

*“What do you want?”*

Your leery question greets me. Every morning, without fail.

“I’m just saying hi,” I say calmly, as I do every day.

Your gaze quickly returns to the tv screen.

From across the room, I watch you for a moment. There you are, comfortable in your nakedness, nothing on but a diaper. As you sit cross-legged, your shoulders slouch forward, your face inches from the screen. With your head craned upward, your dark eyes peer out from underneath your disheveled black hair, fixated keenly on the TV.

*Feral.* Never before have I heard such an ugly word describe a child so young. They warn me about you. How you crawl on tables, hissing and growling. Choking yourself when things don’t go your way. Don’t let him get too close, they say, for you have discovered the pain that pinching above the elbow elicits.

You are the child who scares me.

Nevertheless, today is different. As I wait expectantly for your mundane greeting and brief glance, your dark eyes instead hold my gaze. Your legs unfold from under you, and you hop out of the chair.

You’re walking straight at me. You waddle, shifting the weight of your pudgy body, from one leg to the next. Right, left, right, left. Back and forth you go, your pace quickening as you move towards me. There’s mischief in your dry, chapped lips, your crooked baby teeth peering out from a lopsided smile (or, is that a glimmer of a snarl?).

You are getting closer. I find my body inching away from your approach, taking one step backwards. I try to steady myself, channeling all the confidence that I do not have to stand up straight, although my shoulders creep up unapologetically. My heart roars. My mind darts in an attempt to refuse the fear I feel throughout my entire body. I brace myself for what is to come, feeling my core tighten within. Unsure, I am immobilized by uncertainty.

And there I stand as you hug me, your arms wrapping tightly around my middle. “You’re so skinny,” you say to me.

I stand there, within your embrace, mesmerized by this moment. My eyes are wet, my mouth dry. My knees unbuckle as my muscles relax, my heart softening. My mind wanders, wondering how such a sweet boy can be turned into such a troubled soul. Troubled by my own instincts, my own repulsion, my own wariness of you, you who are no more than seven years old.

Slowly, one before the other, I wrap my arms around you, and sigh.

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**Trisha K. Paul, MD is a resident physician in pediatrics who aspires to be a pediatric oncologist and palliative care physician. *Stroppy Sevens* is a story she shared at the first annual metro-wide Story Slam, a live storytelling event for residents/fellows in Minneapolis, MN. She is an *Intima* editor passionate about narrative medicine, ethics, dancing barefoot, and anything made of cork.**

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