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FICTION | FALL 2016

## The Next Best Day

By Paul Perilli

Buttoning his blue flannel shirt his ears perked to the change of stories on NPR. These days everything about health grabbed his attention and this particular piece was about cancer, not his type, or any specific type, but rather about dogs, in this case a Lab named Lucille being taught to sniff out the disease's unique smell. Where a human's nose, Lucille's trainer went on, has about five million scent receptors, a Lab's has forty to fifty times that, which makes it able to distinguish between healthy and compromised tissue up to a hundred-thousandth the thickness of a sheet of paper.

"It doesn't alarm me to tell you Lucille is a better detector of the disease than my instruments," a doctor at the Center for Disease Control said. "That might not be the situation in the future, but that's the way it is now. We're still learning from her. She's still teaching us."

Canine cancer detection. Pretty nifty stuff. He imagined a long corridor of medical offices occupied by the most sensitive smelling breeds, not only the Lab, but the Beagle, the German Shorthair Pointer, and by far the best of them all, the Bloodhound.

"Your pet may know more about your health than you do," was how the doctor ended.

A moment later the segment was over and the program was on to the drought out West.

"I could have used Lucille a year ago," he told Anne. She was across the room, at the computer. "Actually, four or five years ago. Think of the pain she could have saved me from. Damn."

"You're sure you don't want me to come with you?" Anne swiveled in the chair. "I'd like to, that's only if you want."

He knew she meant it. That she'd go with him every one of these nights. She was being strong. She was being helpful. More helpful than he expected anyone to ever be for him. He who never thought he'd need help. Who would be a cancer patient.

"Nah, I'm fine. Only ten more to go after this. Ten more times getting my ass fried and this stage is over."

He pulled the wool sweater over his head, got his goose down jacket from the closet, his hat off the table and he was ready to go.

"We're sixty percent there. That's good, right?"

He went over and kissed her. "It's good."

"Take a taxi home."

"I'll be all right."

"I know you'll be all right, but you need to save your energy."

Out on Java Street the chilly December air greeted him as if he'd entered an icebox. Twenty degrees. Radiation and chemotherapy pills made him susceptible to the cold. The wool hat and down jacket, not worn for years, were two of the things he was doing to look after himself. Anne made doubly sure of that.

At Court Square he transferred to the E and then to the 6 at 53<sup>rd</sup>. He got off at 67<sup>th</sup> Street, Hunter College, and in five blocks he came to the buildings of Memorial Hospital. He went left off the elevator and waited behind two others to give his name to the man behind the desk, a soft-spoken man with a generous smile. A few taps on the keyboard. "You're all checked in," he said.

He knew the routine after that. Up the elevator two floors to have his blood work done. Just a prick of his forefinger this time, enough of the red stuff for the staff to check his white cell count. From there it was down the corridor to the waiting area outside Dr. Nicol's office. Twenty minutes later he was led to an exam room by a young nurse. "Your white cell count is good," she said. On the exam chair she checked his blood pressure and listened to his breathing. Nothing unusual. And in a few minutes Dr. Nicol came in. She was about forty, with blonde-brown hair. Direct and efficient.

"I feel fine mostly," he said. "Fatigue is an issue. I'm still living my life. Just a little slower."

It was what she expected to hear. What she'd told him to expect on his first visit. Fatigue. Diarrhea. Blood in his stool.

Back down in radiation he waited with the other familiar faces, people like him in a knot they might be able to loosen a while but perhaps never untie. Though still hoping better days were ahead. Looking ahead to that next best day.

He'd talked to a few of them. The guy with the white hair sitting at the far end with his wife had prostate cancer. Forty evenings on the machine for him. "I was under the knife six hours. That was," the man raised his eyes as he went out in search of the number, "seven years ago."

"For this?"

"Stomach."

He checked out half a page of ads for running shoes in ESPN Magazine as he waited for the call of his name. It came a short while later. "Mr Guzzi, you can change."

In the locker room he took off his clothes and put on the hospital gown. Then he was in the room with the giant machine and two

technicians and a meditative program of classical music playing in the background. Belly down on the table, he rested his head on the soft cushion. The technicians set the plastic mold over him that made sure he was in the exact position as his previous treatments. Then they snapped the clips on each of the sides. Locked in, they left him alone and went out to the control room.

“We’re going to start now,” a female voice sounded out.

The machine rotated to a side position and a moment later the staccato, gunfire-like sound started up, the high-energy radioactive beams targeting his tumor. After a minute the machine went silent, swung to a higher angle and the beam began firing again. Eyes closed, he went out in search of something pleasant to think about until the programmed rotation was done. But he could only anticipate its end, of waiting it out, of being freed from the restraint. When the tumor roasting was over the technicians came back in.

“You did a good job tonight,” the lady named Peggy told him. “You didn’t move once.” Closest to him in age, she did much of the talking during these sessions.

“Didn’t move? Now where can I go in this?”

“Nowhere, and that’s the way we like our patients.”

She released the snaps, removed the mold and it was time for him to get back in his clothes.

“Same schedule next week?” he said.

“I’d say the same, but you better ask out at the desk to make sure.”

“Enjoy your weekend.”

“You too. You need the couple of days off as much as I do.”

“I need the rest of my life off from here, but don’t take that personally.”

“No problem. We don’t.”

He was on the 6 and that started him back toward 53rd and the house on Java Street and Anne and the dinner she’d cooked and the futon couch he’d been spending much of his time stretched out on reading, surfing his iPad, and on occasion closing his eyes and letting his mind wander anywhere it wanted to go without his will playing the role of director. One of the places it kept returning to was the Cambridge café named Opus 4 that was close to the company he worked for when he was young and single and getting around.

Opus 4 was a storefront between a pharmacy and a real estate agency. One food preparer/barista behind the glass display and one waitress tending the dozen tables, a funky, arty atmosphere. His favorite waitress was there Tuesday through Friday, he’d noted after a

few weeks. A pretty waitress near his age. Not the most chatty waitress he'd been served by. Though not the kind that kept a frozen smile plastered on her face or treated him like a nuisance instead of a paying customer either. But one who got the business of a cup of coffee and a meat-and-cheese sandwich or a Greek salad out the way with maximum efficiency and enough personality to ensure twenty percent above the bill's total. It became a point of his to try to get her to expose more of that personality. Those first few months she gave little sign she wanted to extend that out to him.

"What's the secret to your salads?" he asked one night before she was off to the counter with his order. "They're fantastic. Never had a better one."

"Never?"

"Not really."

"You need to get out more."

"That's for sure."

"One Greek salad and a French roast coming up."

For the rest of that night he tried to catch her eye when she was with her other customers. But if she knew he was scrutinizing her she gave no sign of anything going on about him, even if in his mind he was hearing her state otherwise. And even if he was making that up, he formed a picture of himself waiting outside for her at the end of her shift. From there they'd walk somewhere to get a drink. Somewhere that stayed open late. The 1369 Club over in Davis Square was that place he had in mind. Jazz ensembles played there and they didn't close until two. He hadn't gotten around to asking that question yet. There was a lot more to find out before he tried that.

He was home on the futon couch, resting back against the two decorative pillows. Feeling beaten about the body. Wiped out was how he described it to Anne.

"Stay here and rest, I'll bring you your dinner," she told him.

"I can get it myself," he said.

But she insisted. Not in any condition to argue, he only wanted to be warm and relaxed. So he waited there with a blanket covering him not thinking anything much. Wanting to read one of the books within arm's reach on the table but going to the iPad instead. It functioned as a television too. He could get a selection of the channels they got upstairs, not all, but a good enough lineup. The Travel Channel was one and that's what he was watching. A man named Andrew going around the world eating the indigenous foods of Chile and Kenya and Sicily and Cambodia. Meals he wished he had in front of him as well as foods he'd never hold in his hand never mind taste, chew and swallow. Bugs and tongues and rotted flesh and the smelliest cheeses. Deep fried Buffalo testicles sliced thin and sauced up. "That is just a fantastic

dish,” Andrew said so often he wondered if he ever really meant it. Tonight he was in Mexico City eating stewed pigs knuckles, ant eggs and corn smut, the latter a plant disease that caused fungus to grow on corn and was considered a delicacy, used as a filling in quesadillas and soups.

“Delicacy? Not according to me,” he told Anne.

She was next to him, their plates on the table at their knees. Chicken legs and rice and applesauce. That was much of his diet these days. Bland food. The BRAT diet it was called: bananas, rice, applesauce and toast. Some protein, thus the chicken. Plenty of water. Hydrate. Hydrate. Food and drink recommended for those with gastrointestinal issues.

The weekend ahead, he felt relief. No radiation for two days. No pills. No being poisoned.

Anne took a bite of chicken and while she was chewing she paraphrased something he’d told her: “You have to take it slow. Focus on what’s in front of you before focusing on what’s beyond that.”

“I’m not thinking of the operation yet. I get what, six weeks between this and that?”

“That’s what Dr. Nicol said. So that’s what it is.”

“No treatments for six whole weeks. Wow!”

He stabbed a piece of chicken and brought it to his mouth. The man Andrew was in Oaxaca eating roasted chapulines, grasshoppers seasoned with salt, chilis and lime. “Those are some of the tastiest I’ve eaten,” he told his host. When he and Anne were in Oaxaca having breakfast at an outdoor café a steady procession of young men and women had come to them with their offerings, wood combs, religious bookmarks, squirming green bugs and, of course, one holding a painted wood bowl in both arms that had a pile of fried grasshoppers in it. They didn’t take her up.

“Why didn’t we try one?” he said. “Why didn’t we try everything? That’s what we were supposed to do.”

“You’ll have other opportunities. You’ll have plenty more of those.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. I know you will. That’s the way you have to think too. If you don’t, I don’t know what to say. But you will. You’re not going through this for nothing. You heard the nurse. If you can be operated on it means you can be fixed. You’re going to be all right.”

“Okay, I’m going to be all right. I’m going to be all right.”

“That’s better.”

The waitress at Opus 4 was back at his table with the Greek salad he needed and the cup of French roast he didn’t.

“You guys should serve alcohol,” he looked up at her. She seemed

surprised by the comment. “Beer would go better with the salad. That’s the way to finish off a day, a couple of brewskies. This,” he nodded at the mug, “is how to start it.”

“There’s lots of other places to get alcohol,” she said. She didn’t seem annoyed to have to engage him. “You’ll have to go to one of those if that’s what you want.”

“It’s an atmosphere issue. That’s the problem. I don’t want to drink all alone. I don’t want to be one of those people. In a café like this, it would feel different.”

“Well...”

“That’s why I like European-style cafes. You get excellent coffee, good food and whatever you like to drink at whatever time you want.”

“But here you are.”

“Same place as you. You have a favorite bar you go to?”

“I like Common Ground. It’s a friendly atmosphere,” she said.

He nodded in telegraphic agreement. He’d been in it once and it in fact was a place filled with student-types eating cheap, high-calorie specials and couples having conversations over a too-loud jukebox. He didn’t like it even if he was with a couple of friends and they’d gotten tipsy and had some laughs. But his waitress had her own tastes and experiences. He was already thinking of ways he might show up at Common Ground again.

He was at the end of a long, Sunday evening walk when he turned away from the direction of his house and went into Brewery Lane. Inside, he was greeted by the tenders of the taps Patrick and Josh. The former carriage house had been stripped to its beams and brick. It had a few long counters and some small tables to sit at. If not squeaky clean, it was comfy enough to spend time in having an IPA or a wheat saison or sour pilsner, tasty, high test brews described as having “a fruity complexity with slightly smoked notes” or “a beer to save to the far end of the night.” He’d been going there one or two nights a week without mentioning it to Anne. He just wanted a beer. It was irresistible. A pint of beer was all. She’d understand his desire to want to do something like that, that was normal and would make him feel he was still that, normal. But radiation stressed his liver and alcohol would only add more stress to it and he’d been advised not to. “Just wait until you’re done with your treatments,” he heard Anne saying. “Then you can have a nightly drink.”

“Or two,” he’d said.

“Hey man, how’s it going?” Patrick said. He was a stocky figure with dirty blonde hair, around thirty, the age the neighborhood was attracting more and more of. If Patrick suspected anything going on with him, the sunken cheeks, the weight loss, the peeling skin on his hands, he never let on.

“This. This is going.”

“Got some good stuff for you.”

“I know, I saw the mailer.” His eyes rolled down the list on the chalk board. One of them Josh described as “really hopped up, full bodied, not too sweet.” And so he went with that.

He had a choice of tables to bring his pint to. Across from the one he settled in a couple was having a chat the same time they were checking their cells. In front of them a guy sat alone staring at his iPad. He had his phone out but mostly ignored it. Cancer had him doing a lot of that, ignoring the unnecessary. The need to stay tuned to all the latest political news: not important. Daily updates of NBA stats: ditto. In the small notebook he’d started keeping to record details of his appointments and treatments, of things he needed to do and questions to ask his doctors, he’d begun putting his own thoughts down and on one page he’d written in stanza form:

You must live everyday like it’s the last.

You must do things you want to and spend no time otherwise.

You must rest.

You must exercise when you can.

You must eat right.

You must talk to people.

You must be calm.

You must enjoy.

You must be true.

He’d gone back to that list to remind himself, and he still needed reminding. Even someone in as questionable a predicament as he was in could, during the day’s regular activity, forget what was important.

He was still working on the pint when a man whose name he didn’t know came in, his pooch leading the way, a French boxer named Fritz. That’s right, he articulated to himself for the first time, he knew the dog’s name but not its owner’s. Twice he’d run into him on the East River Ferry going to Pier 11 but they hadn’t talked about what they did down there. A nod and hello didn’t answer those questions.

The man and dog went to the taps and after that he took a chair near him. Right away he made it a point to catch the man’s eyes. “How goes it?” he said.

“It goes fine now that I’m here.” The man drew attention to his glass.

“I was thinking that same thing,” he said. Fritz ambled over to him and he leaned to the side and gave him a few rubs on the head. Could Fritz tell he had cancer?

The man said, “I saw you in the same spot last Sunday night.”

“I like the view from this seat. I can see everyone coming in the door. Never sit with your back to anyone.”

“Is there a need for you to be like that?”

“Maybe, maybe not.” He smiled. “I’m never quite sure in this town.”

“Well, give me a heads up before the bullets start flying.”

“What do you have there?”

“The Victory.”

“You hit the top rung right away. What’s that, eight ABV?”

“I’m only having one.” The man looked away as if in thought.

“Did that sound defensive?”

“Same here. But I went for the six-five. When I get to eight I’ll be in trouble. I might as well just sign my check over to these guys. They’re like crack dealers. They get us hooked on the five and six percenters then they raise the prices and go in for the kill. Mess with your brain cells and drain your wallet at the same time.”

“They’re not getting any cheaper.”

“But they give us a product we like, we need, and we’re willing to pay for. Do I need the next iteration of the iPhone? No. Do I need this stuff? Yes.”

“I’m Ron.”

“David here.”

“So what is it you do that takes you to Pier 11?”

“Business Analyst.”

“Lawyer, of the public defender variety. Yeah, one of those.”

“Far as I can tell there’s a need for you guys.”

“Some people think like you, some otherwise.”

After that they took a few sips in silence. The man Ron contemplated his phone. When he finished up it was time for him to go. “You’ll be staying for another?” he said. “Can’t blame you for that.”

“One makes me feel good. Two makes me feel better. So maybe I’ll do that.”

He made the effort to connect and he had. He might not have done that before all this. He tossed his figurative head out in that direction. Of course, before all this he wouldn’t have had any need to be in Brewery Lane by himself.

Much as he wanted that second draft he decided against it. No point going there when there wasn’t any need to. The need was to do something normal; that phrase kept coming up and continued to have meaning. To have one beer. How normal is that?

Anne was in the kitchen preparing their plates. Tonight she’d made linguine with the homemade meat sauce they got from a local specialty shop. It was delicious. A favorite of his, she knew. Rich and hearty, not too spicy; he shouldn’t have spicy foods. There was a salad and ice cream for dessert. She was trying to fatten him up. She was taking care of him. He was impressed with her ferocity, her attention to keeping a healthy and healing environment. Tonight they ate at the



dining room table. The television was off. It was just the two of them without any distractions. Anne drank wine, he filtered water.

“Where did you go on your walk?”

“Down to the park and around, back up along Kent to Franklin.”

“See anyone out there you know?”

“Nah, just all those people heading off somewhere. Living, as opposed to what we’re doing.”

“We’re doing fine. This is temporary. Something we have to get through to get you better.”

It took a few tries but the waitress finally said yes to his suggestion they get together for a beer. Common Ground it was and he got there first. He took a stool at the bar and ordered for himself, waiting impatiently. The waitress was a sculptor, from Cleveland he’d found out with a few more inquiries and some futile speculations on the origins of her accent. “You call that thing you’re wiping the table with a ‘warsh rag’? Where, where in the blankety blank do they talk like that?”

“The blankety blank where people drink ‘rut beer’ and put the ‘ruff’ down in their convertibles and sleep in ‘bedrums’. It’s not all that weird considering...”

“Considering what?”

“Boston accents. At least you can understand us.”

It was seven-twenty and she still hadn’t shown up. Not that in the sport of dating twenty minutes was worth fretting over. But a lack of punctuality did send an unambiguous message, he thought, that didn’t put a lot of value on the opponent.

He sat on the stool somewhat dismayed he’d been working so much that his dating life had tumbled downhill to the point women didn’t even want to hold up to their commitment to have a beer and chat a while. The pint settled in his gut, mellowing him somewhat. He was struck by another feeling, one that hoped she’d push through the door before his glass was empty so he wouldn’t have to pay up and start back home with his tail tucked between his legs. And then, just as he lifted his eyes, he saw her heading his way with a broad smile. Her hair was unbound. Her sleeveless blue dress bounced at her knees. Rolling his eyes over her, he almost couldn’t believe his good fortune.

“I see you decided to get here early and start without me.” She was still smiling when she tipped her head to bring attention to his near-empty glass.

“I thought we were meeting at seven so I ordered a beer. There’s no big hurry, but I’m glad you made it.”

“Did we say seven? I don’t know. I thought we agreed to seven-thirty. In fact, I’m pretty sure of it. I never keep people waiting. You see, I’m even a few minutes early. But hey, you’re already one up on me

so I'll have to get going to catch up." She slid up on the stool, juttled out her chin and raised a finger to get the bartender's attention.

"Now that you say it, I guess we did say seven-thirty. Not that it matters. You're here now. That's good. Let me get this one. What do you like to drink?"

A few moments later the bartender set a gin and tonic on the coaster in front of her and she moved the little red stirrer around it a few times.

"Well cheers." He held his glass up. "It's great to get together with you away from Opus 4. Just seeing you without that warsh rag in your hands makes it memorable already."

"Now you're being funny again. I can get you too you know, fah sayin 'I'd like ta ahda a kaffee'. But seeing as I don't know you so well I'll be nice and won't even go that way."

"You got me. But I am glad to be with you outside of that joint."

"That's nice of you to say. I'm there forty hours a week and I feel like I spend most of my life in it."

"Just think of the millions you're making. My tips alone must add up to at least one big one. Maybe two."

"Oh yeah? You must mean the tips you leave at that other place you go to with the waitress that looks like me."

Even at that early point in the conversation he saw how attuned they were. The fascination that started in Opus 4 continued to flow smoothly in Common Ground. He tried to keep their exchange casual even though her striking presence was a bit disconcerting and he was still trying to identify the rather appealing scent she was wearing. And then there was her cleavage, much of which was on display when she leaned forward to make sure he could hear her over the jukebox.

He had a tan around his waist, a six or so inch brownish stripe, the part of him the machine had burned on and around. Radiation was akin to spending time on an exotic beach on some Caribbean island.

"Except for all the other stuff that goes along with it," Anne said.

"Except for all of that," he said.

Now that he was down to his last two treatments he was already saying goodbye to the few folks he'd talked to in the waiting area. He went over to the white-haired guy with prostrate cancer and shook his hand: battle number two in the malignant war for him; he remembered this was his second time around. He was with his wife. The two of them sat holding sections of The Times.

"Keep up that good attitude," the guy told him. A smile opened his face.

"I'm trying my best," he said, "and you do the same."

"You're winding down, that must make you feel good. A free man.

Or almost one.” The man smiled and he realized he should have gotten his name, asked what kind of work he did or he’d done, went off on something besides the routine of white cell counts, the change into smocks that barely covered their asses and getting their flesh fried by a machine that sounded a lot like a military weapon. Which is what it was, he supposed. A cell annihilator. Too late for an exchange of names.

“Oh yeah, I’m free, for six weeks anyway. Then I get sliced and re-sectioned. And even more fun follows that. This is new territory for me. A year-long test of my resolve to see if I can put up with whatever they hit me with.”

“No worries, they take good care of you here. They’re good. This is one of the top places. They have the top people.”

They went on some more on that topic, “it’s all data, that’s all we are to them,” “I wouldn’t go anywhere else,” until he heard his name announced, and said, “My turn at bat. I came over in case I don’t run into you tomorrow.”

“You probably won’t. I’m scheduled a little later. So you take care of yourself.”

“It was nice to meet you,” his wife said. The Times’ front page lay limp over her lap. “Remember, you have to go through this to get better.”

“I’m going to be fine. That’s what I keep telling myself. It’s been my mantra. Everything’s fine, fine, just fine.”

“Well it works,” the guy said. “A good attitude will only help you. It helped me the first time around. It’s helping now. Without it, I don’t know what to say. It’s the only way forward, I know of. The only way.”

That was that. He turned away and went off. He’d never see the man again. Both of them would head off into their futures, longer or shorter ones, depending. That was up ahead, up in the air, unknown. In the changing room he went over that brief exchange as he took off his clothes. He saw how almost every interaction in the waiting area had led to the revealing of some similar outlook, some fierce, irrefutable determination to survive. And that meant developing the right language to express and confirm it. “It helped me.” “It’s the only way to go.” “I intend to be around quite a while longer.” At least that’s what they wanted to show family and friends so as not to worry them. You didn’t want to say, at least not at a therapeutic stage, or one potentially therapeutic, you’re sure you’re a goner. What would there be to talk about after that? How do you go on?

“If you can be operated on you can be cured,” Dr. Nicol’s nurse had told him that first meeting. It was a comment he’d repeated many times to Anne and others.

Sure enough, the following weeks blew by. The radiation and pills that had made him ill for weeks had worn off. He was feeling better. He had more energy. He’d put on weight. It was time to go and the six a.m. town car that would take him to the hospital was right on time.

“They schedule the big operations earliest,” he told Anne on the ride there. “I’m one of the main events today.”

They checked-in at the desk and took two chairs by the windows that looked out at the East Side apartment buildings and the span of the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge beyond them. They sat quiet. There wasn’t much left to say. The tumor radiation had shrunk ninety percent had to be cut out. And when his name was called he and Anne followed the nurse down the bright, fluorescent-lit hallway to the room where he stripped down and hung a gown around himself. Then he rested back on the bed as the nurse took his blood pressure, spiking to one-forty-five over ninety-three. “We get a lot of that in here,” she told him.

“I’ll bet you do,” he said.

“You’re all ready, I’ll be back in a moment,” she said, and left the room.

When she was gone, Anne said, “Just think, you’ll wake up without that little bastard in you. You won’t even know what happened. You can start getting well. That’s good, right?”

“It’s all good to my ears,” he said.

A woman in a white smock came in holding a clipboard with both hands. “I’m Dr. Li, one of the resident interns,” she said. “I have some forms to go over to make sure you understand everything.”

Paperwork. It never ended, even minutes before they were going to put him in la la land. Unlikely as it was, she said, he needed to know the risks. Unlikely as it was, things could go wrong. He nodded, understanding. He signed and initialed several places. When that was done, she said, “Dr. Garcia will be in soon. He’ll go over everything. He’ll answer any questions you have.”

Dr. Garcia was a colorectal surgeon specializing in laparoscopic and robotic techniques. In an article about him he’d been quoted saying, “The tools have changed but the proficiency of the surgeon is what still matters. There’s nothing magical about the robot.” He was followed by the anesthesiologist: “You’ll feel a pinch and nothing much after that until you wake up in recovery,” she said. The lead operating room nurse was next: “Once the room’s all set I’ll be back to take you there.” Then he and Anne were alone. She stood next to the bed, her arms folded, that look of concern he’d noticed her falling into since his diagnoses was again evident, though now with a little more intensity.

“You’ll come out the other side just fine.”

“Of course. I’m in trusted hands.”

“I’ve been impressed with how you’ve handled it. Never a complaint. Not once. I wouldn’t have been so calm about it.”

He smiled up at her. “Calm? Me? That’s because you don’t know what’s been going on in my head.”

“That maybe. But you were amazing. I’m not the only one to say it.”

“I’m ready to go.”

“I know. They’ll be here before you know it.”

There was a lot of activity around him as he was positioned on the table. Flat on his back, his glasses with Anne, the big, round lights hanging over him were intense, everything blurry: the nurses, the interns, the machines. He closed his eyes and withdrew into his own silence, a calm, meditative few seconds he was trying to locate a thought to focus on in, one that would take him into the deep sleep. He’d thought about that moment. What would he think about? What of everything that had happened to him in fifty-eight years would he fix on? And there he was, with her, in Common Ground, the two of them alone that first time. Two youngish people sitting on barstools chatting and having a drink. He smiled, looked into her eyes and said, “So Anne, how about we go somewhere else to get something to eat?”

“What do you feel like having?”

“Anything. Anything you want is fine with me.”

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*Paul Perilli is a writer whose work has appeared in bioStories, The Transnational, Hektoen International, The Satirist and Coldnoon, and is forthcoming in Litro.*

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