



PROSE | SUMMER 2021

## **Dueña de mi vida**

By Alexa Holloway

“Can you print a suicide hotline info sheet in Spanish for the chronic hypertension and diabetes patient in Room 4?”

Amidst the chaos of the student-run free clinic and my myriad of duties as clinic director, the significance of the request from Tatiana, one of the fourth-year medical student volunteers, barely registers. *One.*

“If we don’t tell you, then you’re not complicit!” Elisabeth, the head of the clinic’s chronic care branch, says.

“Psh, whatever, just tell me.”

“The ‘friend’ that drove her here is Gabriel.”

I reflect with exasperation on the rule that says volunteers cannot drive patients to clinic, one of the biggest barriers to care they face, and I am struck, not for the first time, at Gabriel’s kindness and determination to help the patients for whom he interprets. *Two.*

“I sent the resident and attending home,” Regina, my clinic co-director, informs me as I return from dealing with a different crisis, stopping me in my tracks.

“But Room 4 is still being seen by the pharmacy student!”

“Oh...”

*Three.*

It’s now 9:20pm and the significance of those three moments no longer escapes me. The attending is unreachable, and I’m informed that the resident, Dr. Michaels, is calling the police as he drives back to clinic to have the patient from Room 4 involuntarily committed for suicidal ideation.

Dr. Michaels rushes through the side door, a can of grape soda in one hand and his car keys jangling in the other.

“Can I talk to you really quickly before you go in?” I ask, trying to hide the quivering of panic building in my voice. I feel utterly unqualified as a second-year medical student to handle this situation. “The patient is undocumented. I’m worried that the stress of being in a police car and admitted to a hospital where she might be identified by ICE or stuck with a huge emergency room bill she can’t pay will push her mental health over the edge. I mean, she’s living off brown sugar and water currently because that’s all she has at home.”

He sets his soda on the edge of the specimen table, next to the microscope and a magnified image of trichomoniasis.

“I completely understand and appreciate your concern. If we can get her to go of her own accord, she won’t have to interact with them at all... but this is for her own safety. The pharmacy resident is really concerned that she may hurt herself.”

Elisabeth and Regina sit on the floor next to the box of food bank donations outside Room 4 and I hover above them, our ears pressed to the door. I translate as quietly as possible—she’s tired, she’ll go at whatever time they tell her tomorrow, but right now she just wants to go home.

“Uno se conoce, conoce su mente... No voy a cometer un delito así.” Gabriel explains that she is Catholic and considers suicide a sin, his slow Southern drawl seeming to loop itself languidly around the statement. I eye the bag of brandless rice krispies and mac n’ cheese in the food bank box, suddenly painfully aware that I forgot to eat dinner.

“She said, ‘They want to throw me out of my house, I can’t spend all day tomorrow in the hospital.’ They’re threatening to evict her by Friday,” he elaborates. This was the psychological stressor that convinced the resident she was an imminent suicide risk necessitating her admission to the hospital in the first place.

There’s a knock at the opposite end of the hall, and I leave my eavesdropping post to explain the situation to the police, trying to muffle what seems like the deafening click of my heels on the linoleum.

“Yeah, since the pandemic started, we have to involuntarily commit people every day... plus, the number of domestic violence calls has increased by like 10-fold.” The intimidating arsenal hanging from the officers’ belts stands in stark contrast to their calm, seemingly friendly demeanor. And yet, their calm, friendly demeanor seems to stand in stark contrast to the videos I see daily of police violently attacking groups of people peacefully protesting police violence. I shake my head to clear this discordant tangle of visions from my mind, forcing myself to return to the situation at hand.

Gabriel stays with Ms. Villanueva as Dr. Michaels and Tatiana excuse themselves to speak with the police.

“Imagina, yo fui aquí para una consulta para mi azúcar y presión y una plática, imagínate... así hablo en mi hogar pero no voy a hacer nada. No estoy enferma Gabriel, muchachito.” We hear Gabriel explain that he has come to know Ms. Villanueva as her clinic interpreter over the course of the year, but that the doctors don’t know her well enough to know if she is serious or not, and that many people say they won’t do anything and then they do. The weight of this hangs heavy in the air.

If she dies, how will any of us live with ourselves?

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*It’s 2016. I lay on the hardwood floor of my apartment living room next to Principles of Biochemistry, Sixth Edition, staring up at the ceiling. The cover shows a spherical network of interactions in an animal mitochondrion, each dot representing a compound and each line representing an enzyme that interconverts the two compounds. Carefully placed at each of the major nodes are off-brand pills from Central America. Chalky pink Xanax. Cornflower blue Percocet. Snow white Vicodin. I close my eyes and imagine floating down into velvety black nothingness, slipping quietly out of existence, never having to wake again.*

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What if Dr. Michaels is just doing this to cover himself legally?

“How do you typically go about getting magistrate paperwork for an involuntary commitment at midnight?” Dr. Michaels asks the officers, who, until now had not ventured near the hallway that contains Room 4. The tall and tan officer takes out his phone and pulls up the location of the Hillsborough courthouse that Dr. Michaels or Tatiana would have to drive to that night to get the IVC paperwork signed.

Dr. Michaels returns to the room and the dizzying spiral of their conversation resumes. Ms. Villanueva denies she will do anything harmful to herself if allowed to go home. Dr. Michaels continues to explain that it’s not a question of whether she goes to the hospital, but how.

“Yo tenía COVID y tengo miedo de ir al hospital... no quiero infectarme otra vez,” she pleads. For the fourth time, Dr. Michaels patiently explains that he too had COVID, and that he has gone back to work at the hospital every day since recovering and hasn’t been reinfected.

“Sin mi voluntad, nada—no soy loca. Yo soy dueña de mi vida.”

*I am the owner of my life.*

“From the bottom of my heart I don’t want to do this. Please, please go tonight.”

They are locked in a seemingly impossible impasse, desperately pleading with one another, both wanting what they believe is best for her.

The door finally opens, and Elisabeth, Regina and I scatter as Tatiana, Dr. Michaels, Gabriel, and Ms. Villanueva spill out into the hallway. The building’s intercom buzzes overhead as the clinic lapses into silence. Ms. Villanueva’s chipped, dusty rose nail polish stands out against the bright green glucometer box she clutches in her weary hands.

“Señora, ¿que quiere hacer?” Officer Lopez speaks directly to her for the first time.

“Ya le dije.” She wants to go home. He explains that they can’t hold her in the clinic against her will. Her mood brightens as she realizes she can walk out at any time.

“Si yo quería hacer algo a mi, lo haría hace tiempo,” her laugh echoes through the clinic, past the grave faces lining the hall. Gabriel picks up the boxes of food and walks Ms. Villanueva to his car. His mood is indecipherable. Her relief is palpable.

I can still smell the artificial sweetness of the long-forgotten grape soda on Dr. Michaels’ breath as he uses my computer to print out the IVC paperwork, and I suddenly realize why she seemed relieved.

*If he takes out the IVC paperwork, the police are coming to her house TONIGHT to take her to the hospital, not in the morning, I text Gabriel.*

“Ok good, I’ll see you there soon.” Elisabeth hangs up the phone, relief flooding across her face. “He’s turning around. They’re going to the ED.”

Dr. Michaels lets out a sigh that seems to have the emotional weight of every difficult medical decision ever made behind it and asks if we want to do a debrief to reflect on what happened.

“I feel like absolute shit, just being quite candid,” he says. “It’s always so hard—this is like, very hedgy, but when people’s ‘Spidey senses’ start to get raised—when people get worried, you should get worried. You can’t always rely on that but... the fact that the psych pharmacist was so worried...” he trails off. His college class ring glints under the fluorescent light, and I realize we are the same age.

“As far as I can tell, there were several factors that went into what happened tonight.” He begins ticking items off with his fingers. “Medication barriers. Language barriers. Social stressors. Eviction. Documentation. Police and our community. And of course, COVID.”

I sit down for the first time in hours, put at ease by his analysis, the concern in his voice, and his obvious internal struggle with the situation, reassured that his decision was not a knee-jerk reaction to protect himself legally.

As Dr. Michaels and Tatiana leave, I replace the paper pillowcase and discard the crinkled paper on the exam table, still wet from the tears Ms. Villanueva had wiped off as Elisabeth stood poised outside the room with a box of tissues, unsure whether to interrupt or not. The clinic pharmacy’s prescription bottles for Ms. Villanueva sit silently on the counter, solitary evidence of the night.

“Can you OD on atorvastatin, omeprazole, or lisinopril?” I ask no one in particular, handing the medication to Elisabeth to bring to Ms. Villanueva in the ED.

The now-empty clinic stands silently, blending into the surrounding 2 A.M. darkness. I swing my car door shut, and relief spreads through my body as I settle deeply into my seat. Relief that she is getting help and, at least for now, is not in imminent danger. Relief that Elisabeth and Gabriel are staying with her, sparing her a night alone in the ED. Relief that I’m free at last from the fluorescent lights that were making my migraine scream. Relief that this is no longer my story.

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