



Volume 19  
Issue 1  
2025

## Prognosis in Passing

*Kate E. Johnson*

Discharge was not a question she had to ask on those mornings when the fog crept up Parnassus like spilled anesthetic, when it numbed the edges of the hospital until the whole hulking thing floated, unmoored above the city. When all she could do was listen to the footsteps beneath the hanging hem of institutional butter-won't-melt yellow.

The attending's were *legato* notes, heel sliding into toe, trying too hard to be quiet, as if she could tiptoe around the news she carried. The residents moved in clusters, sneakers squeaking like surprised mice, stumbling over medical terms and each other's shadows. They'd gather at the patient's door like anxious pigeons, waiting for the sharp staccato of orthopedic clogs to conduct them into formation. Those clogs spoke in certainties, in firmly planted diagnoses, in you'll-get-through-this-I-promise.

The night shift brought the shuffle-thump of the janitor's boots, a death-knell patience that kept time with the drip-drip-drip of her IV. Those footsteps, God help her, those footsteps. They moved like prayers gone stale in morning-mouth corners, as if the air had turned to river-bottom silt, each footfall echoing the monitors' endless questioning: still-here-still-here-still-here? Past midnight, the cardiac monitor's green peaks

carved valleys of neon through darkness, while the feeding tube pump by her bed could be counted on only for a bit of noise to quiet the mind or tear it to pieces.

Sometimes, in those hours when the fluorescents hummed like dying insects, she'd catch the sound of unfamiliar treads approaching—too fast or too slow or too lost—and her fingers would curl into the sheets, counting breaths until the curtain finally whispered aside and revealed which way the wind would blow today. For she knew, as surely as she knew the taste of plastic tubing and Jell-O that shook like scared rabbits, that footsteps never lied about the news they carried.

### **Note**

1. This manuscript is not associated with or representative of the author's institutional affiliation. Nothing to declare.

### **About the Author**

**Kate E. Johnson** is a Gastroenterology Research Coordinator at Weill Cornell Medical College. Email: [kate.johnson@columbia.edu](mailto:kate.johnson@columbia.edu)