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## Hell Dog

*James Nolan*

When I come to, I'm relieved not to find a breathing tube jammed down my throat, although the surgeon warned there might be one. Through a morphine fog, I glance around at the peeling pea-green paint of my room in the Intensive Care Unit, a fluorescent light wincing overhead. My body has turned into a giant squid, its myriad tentacles connected to a bank of beeping machines with flickering red lights. Every few seconds a woman's high-pitched voice chirps a staccato word from one of the computer screens.

*Gloom. Doom. Boom.*

Are these messages from hell about my condition?

I close my eyes and whoosh through Moorish archways painted in geometric arabesques of brilliant color, as if flying through the vaulted dome of the Mezquita in Córdoba, Spain. Sunlight streams through peaked windows, illuminating the mauves and forest greens of intricate patterns etched Escher-like on the endless ceilings and pillars, narrowing into the far distance and resonating like a Bach organ fugue. I'm in heaven and want to stay here forever.

When I open my eyes, what I see are dilapidated walls, a mute TV suspended above the bed, and the gray chute of an airshaft outside the window. My hand clutches a remote control with a single button and when I press it, the TV doesn't pop on but instead, eyes closed, I'm elevated back to the vaulted dome of the Mezquita.

"How you doing, honey?" The pudgy face of a caramel-colored woman in uniform is hovering over me, bringing me back from my throne on high. "Any pain in your chest? Now don't forget how I told you that morphine-drip works. You just press this here button to up the dose." Her face dimples into a kindly smile. "Know where you at?"

"Hôtel Dieu?"

"That what it used to be called. You in the ICU of University Hospital on Perdido Street after heart surgery."

"This is where I was born. Hôtel Dieu."

"See, you come home."

"To die?" On Perdido Street? Lost on lost street. I wish she'd go away so I could get back to the arched tile arabesques, but they've disappeared behind opened eyelids. The beeping machines take over.

"Did they cut a zipper in my chest?" I feel along my sternum. No bandages, and it doesn't hurt.

"No, just a teeny-weenie incision under your left nipple. Called a mid-cab open heart."

I'd flunked my recent stress test. I thought I'd ace it, since all it entailed was walking. A lifelong nondriver, I walk everywhere in my pedestrian-friendly French Quarter neighborhood, usually at

a brisk New York pace. But the stress-test treadmill scrolled backward not forward, and I wasn't used to scurrying along a rubber sidewalk racing faster and faster in reverse under my feet. Winded, I couldn't keep up.

That was the second bad sign. The first had been a mild heart attack. When I saw my cardiologist, he told me I had a blockage at the intersection of two arteries in my heart, for which he gave me the clinical names. With his fingernail, he made a menacing slice down the front of his chest.

"That's the only way to fix it. Otherwise," he said, "you could have a fatal heart attack any moment."

"I won't be doing open-heart surgery." I'd heard horror stories: a surgeon cracks open your rib cage, lifts out your still-beating heart connected to a heart pump, and while a respirator breathes for you, repairs the damage. Some patients never recover cognitively or physically from the trauma.

"No thanks," I said. "I'd rather take my chances with a heart attack, and just drop dead one day, rather than wheeze and muddle through the rest of my life. Open-heart surgery sounds too much like Aztec ritual sacrifice. Besides, with me you wouldn't get any blessings from the gods. I'm not a virgin."

The cardiologist didn't seem to get my joke. "It's the optimal procedure—"

"Look, I'm in charge of my own health," I said. "Doctors are just my technical consultants."

"Then you should know that the artery with the blockage," he continued, "often called 'the widow maker'... ."

Even though I'm not married, that term got my full attention. If anyone ever doubts the power of poetic description to deliver a memorable impact, consider the metaphor "widow maker." The scientific term had sailed right past me.

I did some research, and discovered that a new procedure called a "mid-cab" could accomplish the same results. It involved a three-inch incision that allowed the surgeon to insert a robot to repair the artery. "Zipper" was used to describe the scar on the sternum that regular open-heart surgery left, of the Aztec ritual sacrifice variety. "Mid-cab" sounded as easy as catching a cab at midnight in midtown Manhattan. This is the associative way we poets think.

Now my heart has been invaded by a robot, and I'm tracing the oozing bandage under my left nipple. "You mean here?" I ask the nurse. Not to alarm them, I'd told some friends I was going into the hospital for a nipple tuck. A couple of days, at most. I didn't even bring my cell phone charger, my fatal flaw.

"That's it. Your pulse is okay," the nurse says, checking one of the machines.

"What's that machine saying?"

She shoots me a quizzical look. "What you mean what it say?"

"Sometimes it says 'gloom,' other times 'doom,' or then again 'boom.'"

She shakes her head. Then she takes my hand, speaking in a soft fairy-tale voice, as if telling a bedtime story to a child. "'Gloom' mean your oxygen levels ain't so high. 'Doom' mean they way

down low. ‘Boom’ mean you doing just fine. What it saying now?”

I listened. “Boom.”

“See? So your blood just a-booming away.” She gives me an indulgent smile.

When she leaves the room, the machine distinctly chirps *doom*.

I close my eyes and go back to the arabesque arches of the Mezquita.

Back again, she shakes my arm. “Mr. Nolan, doctor says we got a new drug for you. Make you feel like a million bucks. It called Hell Dawg,” she drawls.

“Hell Dog?” I try to picture Cerberus, the triple-headed dog that guards the gates of hell, but can only conjure the label of a bottle of rotgut you’d chugalug behind a 7-Eleven. “That sounds like fun.”

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I always swore I’d never end up like my mother, popping pills and hanging on to every word of the many doctors she visited. Or like my father, sneaking after-dinner cigarettes behind the garage. That they both had heart conditions was a memo I received, but didn’t pay much attention to. I swam three times a week, walked everywhere, cooked only fresh, natural food, and postponed doctors’ visits, intending to remain strong and healthy. I was determined to avoid the complex medical procedures that plagued my parents’ old age. But genetics has taken the place of Greek fate in our lives. Oedipus vows he’ll never kill his father and

marry his mother, as the blind soothsayer Tiresias prophesizes the child will do when he grows older.

But then he does.

So at sixty-four I had a mild heart attack, or at least the doctors told me I did, although I didn't feel much. No, I didn't drop to the floor clutching my chest, and I learned only later that mine was called a "silent heart attack." My father had his first heart attack at the exact same age, cutting the grass one June in the unforgiving New Orleans heat, and his father had died of a fatal one at age sixty-five, pulling vines from a live oak in July. My father's maternal grandfather, an Irish immigrant, died in midsummer of a heart attack at fifty while driving the mules of a drayage wagon heaped with cotton bales along the Mississippi levee.

So I decided to pay attention to my genetic fate.

I'd been experiencing some symptoms of angina, not like an elephant sitting on your chest but rather like recurring heartburn. Maybe, I decided, it was something I ate. But the doctor that I finally visited at the Musicians' Clinic that Wednesday afternoon in November reported that my heart was beating irregularly, in a state called atrial fibrillation, and the EKG indicated I could be suffering a heart attack at that very moment.

"If you were my father, I'd tell you to go straight to the emergency room," she said. That I was old enough to be some jowly doctor's father woke me up, like a bucket of ice water to the face. And then I thought of my own father. And his father. And his grandfather.

“But I don’t have time to have a heart attack,” I protested. “I have eight guests coming tomorrow for Thanksgiving. Besides I don’t have insurance and can’t afford to go to a hospital.”

“Guess what, James?” The nurse at the Musicians’ Clinic was checking my file in her computer. “Three days ago you qualified for Medicaid. And we’ll pay for your cab to the University Hospital ER. I’ll give the taxi company our credit card number.”

At the time, I was a poet occasionally performing in several New Orleans clubs, collaborating with jazz and flamenco musicians, so was having free yearly checkups at the Musicians’ Clinic and suddenly—how did the social worker wrangle it?—that very week I’d gotten on Medicaid.

“Just remember,” the nurse told me, “when you walk into the ER, say ‘chest pains,’ and they’re required to treat you immediately.” Lesson learned: “chest pains” is the open sesame to any ER, even if you have a broken foot.

The decrepit taxi driver waiting for me downstairs was about ninety years old, couldn’t figure out how his dispatch radio worked, and no, hadn’t gotten the credit card number.

He shook his skeletal grey head. “Ain’t gonna live to see the next Carnival.”

“Then we’ll have to get the number from the nurse again. Follow me.”

He shuffled behind me to the elevator, in which he faced me to say, “Shouldn’t be working at my age. Ain’t gonna live to see the next Carnival.”

When we entered the Musicians' Clinic, the receptionist took one look at my stumbling cabdriver. "We're not seeing any new patients."

"He's not a patient," I explained. "He's the taxi driver taking me to my heart attack."

At that moment the social worker waltzed into the waiting room, narrowed her eyes to take a closer look at my cabdriver, and volunteered to drive me herself to University Hospital.

Down in the lobby, the cabdriver tried to exit by walking straight into a plate glass wall. We helped him back into his cab, still muttering "Ain't gonna live to see the next Carnival."

Once at University Hospital ER, I was escorted directly into the ward from the chaos of the jam-packed waiting room after I patted my heart and said "chest pains." The blood work indicated that I was indeed having a heart attack, and I was told I'd be sedated to undergo an angiogram. If any large blockages in my arteries were discovered, I'd be given an angioplasty: a stent would be inserted to reopen the blood flow. I was put in a hospital Johnny and lay on a gurney, cancelling the Thanksgiving dinner on my cell while being wheeled through the noisy corridors into the operating room. "Sorry to cancel at the last minute," I shouted into the phone, "but I'm having a bit of a heart attack. Can we reschedule for Friday?"

Then a wall of blue scrubs surrounded me. The eager young faces of the residents who staffed this public teaching hospital were staring down at me under the blazing lights, as if I were a splayed Thanksgiving turkey ready to be stuffed and

trussed. Waiting for the cardiologist to arrive, I realized I needed to take a leak before the ordeal began.

“Excuse me,” I said, sitting up on the gurney, “but where’s the rest room? I just need to step inside to urinate before—”

“Oh no,” said one of the female residents. “We’ll attach a catheter.”

While the smirking Greek chorus of residents observed, the woman flipped up my hospital Johnny and unrolled a condom attached to a tube onto my shrinking penis. I’d never been less excited in my life during this routine intimacy, normally restricted to bedrooms.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

I looked down at my flaccid member and laughed. “Never been less so, baby.”

“I mean for the anesthetic?”

When I regained consciousness in the post-op ward, a resident with a three-day stubble told me that I’d have to remain motionless, spread-eagled for twenty-four hours, until the angioplasty tube could be removed. Two stents had been placed inside my heart, and I’d need to take cardiovascular medication for the rest of my life.

“Doing a lot of cocaine lately?” he asked, eyebrow cocked.

I wasn’t sure if this was a resident’s sophomoric attempt at gallows humor, or if he was trying to establish his street cred with a patient from the hip Musicians’ Clinic. “Why, you got some?” I asked, nostrils flaring.

Maybe it was the anesthetic wearing off, but I was feeling a rush of hilarity. I’d have done a

standup comedy monologue, if I could have stood up.

“I haven’t snorted a line in twenty years, but have been doing a hectic book promotion, living on Cuba Libres and cheese omelets.” That got a knee-slapping cackle out of a red-headed nurse. I later told her that this antsy patient had never remained stock-still for twenty-four hours in his whole peripatetic life.

“I need Valium for that. Blue. Ten milligrams. Every six hours. ” Years ago, I’d learned about downers on the streets of San Francisco.

She nodded, as if she knew I meant business.

When I checked out a day later AMA, or Against Medical Advice, I gave the red-headed nurse who brought me the Valiums a bear hug and told her I was in love with her. Would she marry me? After all, at one point I would have shacked up with any chick who gave me four blue Valiums on the streets of San Francisco.

And so instead of Thursday, I had the Thanksgiving dinner at my house on Friday, with two stents in my broken heart. The nurse had said she was already hitched.

\* \* \*

*Gloom*, chirps the machine.

As soon as I regain consciousness in the ICU, I tell a nurse to take out the catheter. It’s excruciating. This plastic tube isn’t connected by a sexy Trojan but rammed into the opening of the most sensitive part of my anatomy. I insist on a bucket so I can stand up to pee.

“But that way we can’t measure the urine quantity in these collection bags,” she protests, holding up a plastic udder striped with red lines.

“Then stick a damn ruler in the bucket,” I thunder.

I’m not about to suffer ongoing agony to make someone’s paperwork easier. Now, whenever I stand up to piss in the bucket, the wires attached to my body send the monitors into a cacophony of beeps and alarms, and nurses come rushing into the room. “Mr. Nolan,” they cluck, steering me back into the bed.

This must be why they’ve taken away my morphine and put me on Hell Dog. But I’d stopped punching up the morphine even before the remote disappeared. The ascents into arabesque heaven followed by the descents into ICU hell were too jarring. Eyes closed: *heaven*. Eyes open: *hell*. Closed tight: *heaven*. Wide open: *hell*. So like most people, I settled for the permanence of hell on earth because my glimpses of heaven were far too fleeting.

There’s something about Hell Dog that keeps me from being able to read, concentrate, or think straight. Nor am I sleeping or eating. The microwaved slop arrives in a flat brown plastic container with a swirled top that resembles a cow pie. I gag every time I see it.

A young male nurse talks with this troubled patient as if he actually sees me as a person. I tell him I’m a writer who lives in the French Quarter, and he jots down the titles of two books of my fiction. My cell phone has lost its charge, since I didn’t think I’d be here long enough to recharge it, so I

can't talk with friends. I treasure his conversation. I'm surrounded by bossy middle-aged women, who make me feel like either a rambunctious juvenile delinquent or a crotchety old man.

It's three in the morning and I'm fully awake, bursting with vitality. The young man asks me if I need anything.

"Yes. I need to get out of this bed, put on a robe, and sit in that chair to read the *New York Times*."

He looks skeptical, but helps me out of bed and into my cotton kimono, the only robe I have. Then rearranging the wires so that the machines don't beep, he seats me in the chair. I feel normal for the first time in days, that is, until bloody water starts gushing out of my incision. It soaks my hospital gown, the robe, and the chair, pooling around me on the floor.

The young nurse is beside himself. He pushes an alarm button. A siren wails. A swarm of orderlies takes over the room with X-ray machines, hypodermic needles, and bright lights. My sopping self is dumped back in bed.

"Looks like my water just broke," I say. "What should I name the baby?" Something about hospitals brings out the comic in me. Could humor be the front man for panic?

It turns out that my chart clearly indicates the surgeon's instructions: that I should sit up three hours a day so the chest wound can drain. None of the nurses noticed this, or probably didn't want the fuss of rearranging the wires and helping me into a chair.

How much easier to give me a Hell Dog.

I overhear the nurses at their station talking about moving me onto the cardiology ward, “whenever there’s a bed free on the clean side.” It’s not reassuring to learn there’s a clean and a dirty side to cardiology. The first time I visited the surgeon on the hospital cardiology unit, I rode the elevator alone with a shackled prisoner in an orange jumpsuit being led on a chain by his guard. This place is one step up from Parish Prison.

I punch the keys of my dead cell. I’ve got to get out of here.

“Time for your little ole’ Hell Dawg,” one of the nurses singsongs.

I purse my lips and shake my head in a defiant *no*. *Doom*, squawks the machine.

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Day four on the ICU: I overhear the head nurse talking on the phone at her station and make out the words “Palo Alto,” “your cousin James,” and “heart surgery.” I jump out of bed, sending the monitor alarms into a strident burst of beeps, and bang on the window separating us.

“Is that my cousin Melinda calling from Stanford University?” I shout. “I need to talk with her.”

“This is the unit’s landline,” the nurse tells me, “with a short cord.”

“Please tell her to call you back on your cell phone and bring it to me.”

Two minutes later I’m speaking with Melinda. “Look, Mixie, this filthy place is going to kill me, and my cell is dead. Call our cousin Jim and ask

him to come pick me up at three tomorrow afternoon in his truck. I'm signing out AMA, and I know they'll give me a hard time, so ask Jim to bring along my social worker friend, Kichea Burt." Melinda sounds doubtful, so I pour out my whole story. "Not sleeping or eating for four days isn't the right formula for healing. By the way, have you ever heard of a med called Hell Dog?"

"Hell Dog?"

"Well, I've stopped taking it, and suddenly what I have to do is crystal clear."

\* \* \*

The next afternoon I shave, unfasten the wires attached to me, dress, and sit in the chair to wait. Up and about in the room for the first time, I stare out of the grimy window into the airshaft, notice that the TV remote lacks a battery—no wonder it never worked—and glance into a dank closet that contains a stopped-up toilet that probably hasn't been cleaned since the day I was born in this hospital. Then I read the *New York Times*.

"We're here to see your favorite patient." Like me, Kichea Burt grew up in New Orleans, but lived for a long time in California, and I'd recognize her clear, crisp accent anywhere. Her gray dreadlocks swing around the door frame. "You're looking good," she tells me.

"Time to blow this joint," I say, jumping into her arms.

My cousin Jim Flynn, a riverboat pilot, saunters into the room and glances around. "Jeez, this looks like the hold of a Libyan freighter."

“Not so fast,” Kichea says. “Signing out Against Medical Advice is a serious move, especially if you’re not cognizant enough to take responsibility for yourself. Who’s the President of the United States?”

“Oh, come on.” For once in my life, I cooperate. “Barack Obama.”

“What year is this?”

“2012.”

“Where are you?”

“University Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana. Kichea, have you ever heard of a drug called Hell Dog?”

“Hell Dog?” She squints and repeats the name in the local drawl. “You mean Haldol?”

“That’s what they’re giving me here.”

“You mean they’re dosing you with the heavy-duty antipsychotic Haldol? That’s a drug for managing violent schizophrenics. How many times a day?”

“Four or five.”

“Is your bag packed? We’re going.”

Without reading the document, I once again scrawl my name on the AMA form presented to me on a clipboard along with a disapproving look. “A bed just opened up on cardiology,” the head nurse tells me. “There can be fatal consequences if you leave now.”

“Even if it’s on the clean side,” I say, edging toward the swinging ward doors, “I’m not interested.”

“Wow, look at Canal Street,” I murmur five minutes later, staring out of Kichea’s windshield. “It’s so beautiful.” Actually, it’s seedy, but such is my first impression on being back out in the world.

Hands propped on my shoulders, my cousin Jim walks behind me on the majestic curved staircase that leads up to my second-story French Quarter apartment. I bolt ahead, taking the steps two at a time.

For the next two days, I live on mint chocolate-chip ice cream in front of the TV, napping and talking on the phone. I pull the bandage off the wound under my left nipple and soothe it with the gooey juice squeezed from spikes of my aloe vera plant. I scrub off the patches of adhesive stuck to my skin where the monitor wires were connected. I hose the ferns hanging on my balcony, drink lots of water, and stand up to take gloriously unfettered leaks. My heart, invaded by robots and all the widow-making dogs of hell, feels on the mend.

On the third day, I walk the eight blocks from my apartment on Dumaine Street to Canal Street, which still looks beautiful. Then I amble home, stopping at a grocery along the way. This isn't a stress test, but life. The only kind of stress test I can't pass is being incarcerated in a hospital. Just think, I could still be languishing on the dirty side of the cardiology ward popping Haldols.

"Boom," I say to myself strolling down Royal Street. "Boom."

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In memory of Kichea Burt,  
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