



“Lost Soul Found” by Elaine Gao
2nd Place, Short Story 16-18

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A fizz. A bursting crackle of energy from the tips of two separate electric circuits.

It was a coincidence, the grating together of these two cables that had been soaked in sewage water for ages. Thus came me, not a robot, not an android, or any kind of being too mythical or out of the ordinary, merely an existence without a physical body, sound, or mind to prove my existence. A lost soul trapped.

The broken facility, my birthplace, was then turned into a hospital, a big one, with large floor-to-ceiling windows lining whitewashed walls that in the morning gentle rays, donned a silky glow.

A set of SUV tires screeched down the hospital's entrance as the wheelchair's rimmed lip clinked. Ambulance sirens screamed, and stretchers glided across white tiles. Through time, I have come to know that amid this massive building, I resided within a single security camera overlooking a room in the children's hospital.

It was forty-eight years and one hundred days after my existence when the nurses wheeled in a young girl only just done with surgery. They hooked her to the IV machine with all those dangling fluids and her oxygen concentrator. I couldn't help but notice her sunken cheekbones and very chapped lips. Drenched in sweat, her raven hair clung to her forehead in rather messy knots.

"Leah." Her eyelids fluttered open, revealing murky pupils like she was wandering in a sea of unconsciousness.

One of the nurses checked her vitals. "How are you feeling, Leah?"

"Good." Turning to see her parent's worry-stricken faces, she managed a weak smile then quickly nodded off again.

My vision zoomed out on the profile on the doctor's clipboard, reading how she had just had an appendectomy and the severe inflammation of her bowel. No one came to visit the next day. Nor the day after. It was only her parents coming and going.

For the first day, Leah passed in and out of sleep regularly like they were stops on a bus line. When awake, she seemed here but not quite so, like her soul had invisibly departed from the body and couldn't find its way back.

My heart wept for the girl. Not knowing the nature of my existence, I didn't find it too surprising that I could feel intense emotions like this. I had grieved along so many patients and their families that I don't think ten fingers could count it all.

"She should get up and walk around for as much as she could today." The doctor advised.

Leah nodded and sent him off with more strained smiles. She soon dozed off. Bathed in striped beams of sunlight from the window blinds, her cheeks rose and fell in a peaceful rhythm that set the whole room in a serene tone.

At a small groan, her mother quickly set her laptop aside. "How much pain, darling?"

"Five...Four." *Lie.*

She struggled with the words. "Can you help me up? I want to walk when I've still got the energy." I was impressed.

Her mother and I grimaced simultaneously as she grappled up. Imagine the incisions on her stomach stretching and bending from the tiniest movement, like hundreds of sharp knives twisting inside your body! Gripping her mother's hand, she propped herself up from the bed and erected herself upright on her feet, knees shaking.

"Good job, darling. Now, hold tight, and walk slowly."

She took tentative steps like she's almost forgotten about the feel of walking and the sensation of her limbs being something other than numb. Left foot. Followed by right. Left. Right. Staring at her moving legs, the corners of her mouth lifted by a fraction. I felt myself smiling as well, but oh! I cringed as she lost her balance, nearly knocking over her IV pump.

"I'm perfectly alright, mom," Leah assured. "No, I don't need to lie back down. Let's walk for a bit more." My smile broadened. She continued walking, getting steadier and steadier with every round she made around the room.

It hurt. Unlike her mother, I saw past her smiling facade, but why would she, a mere teenager, be willing to overexert herself like this? Legs wobbling and back a little hunched, Leah trudged around her not-so-big room for as long as fifteen minutes. Then, exhaustion won out and urged her back to bed.

Late at night, thin rays of moonlight rendered the gnarled trees outside into monster-like shadows cavorting on the walls. Leah obviously couldn't fall asleep.

Little did I know that this was the night that shifted my once-incorrigible fate.

Roughly two in the morning, Leah still squirmed in bed most restlessly. Even at night, I could discern her eye color as impossibly black with only flecks of hazel. They were like two dark glinting orbs, and it took me a while to notice that they were transfixed on me. On the security camera.

Her mouth was moving really slowly in slow motion. I delved into every syllable with my utmost attention.

She said, "It hurts," not out loud, probably not wanting to wake her mother, but those two words shattered my heart if I had one.

"It hurts so much."

She was all nods and smiles when it came to the adults, but, at night, when nobody is looking, she cries out.

Her lips were moving again. "If someone's there, can you keep it a secret?"

My mind snapped. *How did she know?*

"How childish of me," she spoke, "Of course, there's no one there." I didn't know whether relief or disappointment flooded me.

"I can't believe I'm talking to a security camera, but I can't sleep, and I'm feeling pretty lonely. Can we just pretend that you exist?"

"Yes." It was an ecstatic whisper.

"You know, this stupid pain all began with a bowl of bad miso soup. It was Monday night, and this churning pain heaved inside my stomach. I curled myself into a ball on the sofa, a quilt over my body, and hugged my knees to my chest, scared out of my wits... Three hours. I thought if I could last three more hours, daddy would be awake, and he would know what to do."

"...But the unrelenting sea shredded my little ship into splinters until one sole plank remained for me to hold on to. I remember grabbing onto my phone. Barely having the energy, I typed letter by letter in the search bar, 'Could you die from food poisoning?' I was being naive, sure. Just when dawn was breaking into the world with its million spots of brightness coalescing into one dandelion yellow glow permeating the sky, I yelled for my sister to run upstairs and get mom and dad. I had surgery the next night, but I was stuck in hospital from 7 am."

She chuckled weakly. "The problem with this hospital is that it's too big. Gigantic, actually. Mom and I had to walk to the other side for a blood test and then double back to the same spot for an X-ray. I hated it the most when the doctors kept pressing on my stomach, asking

me where it hurt the most. Couldn't they understand the simple fact that when it hurts, I had no idea where it bloody hurt more? Sorry."

"Oh no, it's fine." I was too engrossed in her story that I almost forgot she was talking directly to me. "You had every right ." It's weird. What I say doesn't formulate into words and sentences that actually make a sound, but it's stranded in mid-air like an idea only conveyed halfway.

"I could feel you telling me it's fine..." If I had a mouth, it would be wide open.

"Well, that's just my wishful thinking! Talking to a security camera..." She shook her head. "Do you know why I always lie on the pain scale? I don't want mom and dad to be worried, obviously, but mostly, I want to get out of this place. I liked my normal life. It's been good talking to you, Mr. Security Camera, but you don't exist."

For a while, she grew silent, and soon, that much talking put her to sleep.

The next day, she and her parents busied themselves with getting out of the hospital. She's forgotten about last night. I knew it. I watched with mixed feelings as the most genuine smile now tugged on the girl's rosy lips. The prospect of finally being able to go home, how much she rejoiced in that! Her beautiful hair, now washed and coiled up in a bun, gradually receded out of my view, engulfed by the white doorway.

You don't exist. That's what Leah said to me. She was right. I don't.

Down in the surveillance room, the security officer grudgingly snubbed out his cigarette and reached for his walkie-talkie. "The security camera in Room 203 is all blacked out, sir."

"It's probably just a glitch, but I'll have it fixed."