

Kim O'Neil
from *Night Vision*

There is something called a death kit. Each unit has its own dialect, in the way of stressed little nations or street gangs. That's what you call it on 7 West. The kit contains: tags for toe and neck, rubbing alcohol, gauze, and large a sheet of plastic like the drop cloths they sell at hardware stores. That's all. There's paperwork, lots of it, but the death kit is small. It comes in a plastic bin the same footprint as all the med room supply bins, gloves, tape, fluids -you're a big teaching hospital, everything must stack-but shorter in height. About the size of a picnic basket. It's purple.

On the front porch of your building is a package wrapped in brown butcher paper. The address is yours, and the apartment number, but nowhere is your name. No return address. Every day you pass it. The sky is crisp and bright and unforgiving and in a few days the package fades to the color of beach stones.

It's there for the taking but no one does. You are disheartened to see that the neighborhood is safer than you thought.

The D train is late and people gripe. A cold wind sweeps the platform. Commuters with watches check them, compare. You used to. Time lost pained you. Now with three shifts plus weekends, there's still too much. The over-the-counter stuff does nothing, so at night you study the bad paint job on the ceiling and wait for the alarm at six.

When your shift ends, you do all the taped reports, update the flow sheets, read through the lab tests, reread the MARS, and are wiping down the kitchenette counters when Phaedra says, Helen, go. You'll miss the last train.

When you get home, the phone is ringing.

You pick up on the seventh ring. A man's voice.

Is Harry there?

Who is this?

It's about the car.

When you say no, Harry isn't there, is the car ready? the man says, I need to speak to Harry.

Can I take a message?

Can you tell me when he'll be in?

No, you say.

He hangs up.

When it rings again in an hour, you think about turning it off but you can't afford to miss a call. It could be work.

Tell Harry to call Carl. At the shop.

It's the same voice.

I'll tell him.

You hang up without saying good bye. Your hands shake as you turn up the TV.

Angela pulls her sweater closed across her chest. We have groups here, she says. I don't need to tell you what they can offer, you've run them yourself, but that doesn't mean you can't join. In fact, I think it would be a fine idea.

I do a good job, you say. You see the sympathy in her eyes angling for a foothold. Step back, let it fall. What I need, you say, is work.

On the walls are photos of smiling bald kids, who look not younger bald, but older. On the poster to their right a kitten hangs from a tree limb in the time-honored fashion of mail-order inspiration. A classic but you forget how it goes. Lately you are forgetting things. This is what Angela is telling you now, it's a risk they can't take, there was that assistant who hung the wrong bag, the Pyxis screw-up, Children's is under a lot of scrutiny, you've been under pressure, and as she goes on, you try to recall exactly what this kitten is supposed to inspire. The slogan below reads "Hang--" something. Angela's head obscures the rest. A puzzle. You lead your mind there like a toddler. For a moment you're stumped. It's like when you do somersaults under water and for a panicky second forget which way is up. There, Hang in there. You got it. But the cat stares you down with an expression not of endurance or pluck, but clearly: accusation, malice, revenge.

When you return to her, Angela is smiling at you in a way that doesn't expose her teeth. Not sympathy. You were wrong.

I'm afraid I have to disagree. I'm giving you a month's leave, Helen. I've written you a very good referral. Home care is a booming field.

Harry went out to get a mango and didn't come back. You were in your third month, nauseous and starving at once, and when he said, Anything, it was all you could think of that didn't make you green.

How about pickles, Harry said.

No thanks. A mango's good.

A pickle hits the spot. That's what the books say. He found the remote behind your pillow and started flipping. Personally, when I'm puking and bloated, there's nothing I enjoy more than a good, sour--

Harry, shut up and go. You'll miss your game.

Mangos weren't in season and the car was in the shop, which meant a walk to the place where the produce flirted with you in expensive, come-hither rows, no soda, booze or cigarettes for sale, a fact which, though not news, Harry continued to resent, a fresh blow every time.

Dill, right? This as he pulled the door closed behind him. Two words. Two syllables you can rewind, replay, speed up to three, four times a second, 200 times a minute until they fuse into a drone, the hum of a small appliance. You can slow them down, walk the hills and valleys of them, until they grow so vast with meaning, you forget which way you came. You lose your way.

It's been thirty days since Henry disappeared, leaving his toothbrush, his tube socks and his unborn child, twenty since that child ceased to exist anywhere outside Harry's mind. Wait til you're out of the woods, the OB said, and we did. We told no one, and so there is no one to untell.

Death has a room. The hospice room is nicer than all the other patient rooms. Pushy parents who name-drop the board director's brother-in-law might get their kid a single but only end-of-lifers get hospice. It's bigger. A double for one kid with a king-sized bed, queen-sized fold-out couch, 300 thread count linens, two 20-inch TVs, full refrigerator, microwave, stereo, a handmade quilt, enough throw pillows to build a small fort, and one extremely hardy, low maintenance rubber plant that you would swear was synthetic if you didn't break a leaf.