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ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT US FEEDBACK

Fiction: Clinic by Kris Nelscott

The clinic always has an eerie silence right around midnight. It's not empty—Lord knows, the place is almost never empty—but at midnight, everything seems to stop: even the speed freaks slow down for thirty seconds, maybe a minute, an eternity to them.

Me, I look up from whatever I'm doing, and take note. Usually I'm filling out paperwork, or settling someone into the calm center, or cleaning out the bathroom for yet the thousandth time. It's not glamorous work here—hell, it's not even good-paying work—but it's gotta-be-done work, if you know what I mean.

I've been doing the midnight-to-three shift six days a week since January. I'm not a doctor, not yet, and I'm barely a nurse. Kinda like one of those paramedical personnel that the papers talk about, although technically I do mostly secretarial work. All the girls do more secretarial than anything, although sometimes we get to assist on the more difficult stuff.

I want to do hands-on, especially the tough stuff, but I'm not really trained for it. Although Doc Clahorn, he says that we're better trained than half the surgeons who leave for Vietnam. We know triage and overcrowding and poor conditions. We see junkies by the dozens and starving kids and more barely living teenagers than I want to think about.

And we see a lot of them at night, because people get scared at night, and they come floating in—the trip's bad, the dream's bad, the junk is bad—expecting us to help.

We can't always help though. And even though I knew that, I didn't really know that, not until the Friday before last.

#

That Friday, I got in about 11:40, carried my bike up the stone steps to the back of the old Victorian someone converted just after the war—the one my Dad says was a real war, not what he calls this police action in some hot country that doesn't appreciate our guns and muscle. I stashed my bike in the basement supply room, and changed clothes for the second time in an hour. My nurse's uniform stays at San Francisco General, but I learned long ago not to wear clothes I value at the clinic. I put on a peasant blouse that was just a little too thin, blue jeans filled with wear holes and frayed on the hems, and combat boots, literally. I got them at Army Surplus, and found they were the best for whatever came into the clinic or got spewed down its hallways.

I made it upstairs right before the midnight quiet, and stood in the hallway between reception and the calm center, looking at the candles just like the junkies do, and thinking this is about the most interesting life a girl could ever have. There were three people in the calm center, two covered in blankets even though it wasn't a cold night, and one rocking to and fro, hands folded, head bowed. They all looked male to me, but I couldn't exactly tell. It was dim in there—candles only—and even those seemed a little pale.

A street kid named Judy slept on the couch in reception—no one ever had the heart to turn her away—and a volunteer who called himself Holiday was taking information from a long-haired girl who, from the smell of her, hadn't bathed in days. Two boys I didn't recognize played cards near the coffee machine, and a hoodie named Klepto sat on the bean bag chair, flipping open, then closing his switchblade.

All the exam room doors were closed, but the lights were on, meaning doctors and/or patients were in each one. I slid into the chair next to Holiday, and asked, “Busy night?”

“Naw.”

Busy here was different than busy at the hospital. Busy here meant patients lined up out the doors, and some speed freak crashing in the calm center, and half a dozen hippies on bad trips crowding the hallways.

The girl handed Holiday her filled-out chart—half the information would be faked, no matter how good the volunteer was at getting people to talk—and glanced at Klepto. Then she moved toward the coffee machine, staring at the donations jar and the sign beneath it which read in Day-Glo letters:

The Clinic needs bread to survive. So give up a little bread every time you have a cup of joe.

She squinted at it like she didn’t understand it, and I wondered what she was on.

“You almost done with your shift?” I asked Holiday.

He shook his head. “I switch to janitor now that you’re here.”

So that he could sleep once the bathrooms and exam rooms were clean. Sleep in the basement, next to my bike and all those moldy newspapers from the former owners.

We weren’t supposed to provide crash space, but we couldn’t help it. Sometimes it was impossible to say no.

Holiday got up from reception, leaving me there, and headed toward the back. I turned on the radio, and spun the dial till I found KSAN. Someone had left it on a dweeb station, messing with the natural order of the things, and if it continued, I’d have to leave a note.

Big Brother and the Holding Company came out of the speakers, Janis Joplin’s boozy voice sliding over the notes like she’d invented them herself. I’d seen her at the Fillmore and was shocked at how very small she was, certainly not big enough to hold a voice like that. I’d seen her outside the clinic too, buying junk, and I wondered how come someone like her needed stuff.

The front door banged and Soldier Bob came inside. He wrapped his army jacket around his big chest, then rubbed his hands together.

“Fog’s coming in,” he said to me, by way of greeting.

“I think it followed me from SFG.”

He grinned and poured himself coffee, careful to stick a nickel in the donations can. The boys on the floor moved so that they wouldn’t be near him, and the girl huddled in on herself. Klepto clutched his blade—closed—and eyed Bob as if he didn’t know what Bob would do.

Nobody knew what Bob would do, that’s what made him so effective. He was tall and broad, but his ‘fro and the scars that ran across his cheeks scared even the toughest of hoodies. He didn’t take crap neither, which was why Doc Steve kept him on the door most nights.

Soldier Bob didn’t get paid—he was on disability for a variety of things only Doc Steve knew about—but he was always here, sometimes more reliable than the folks like me, who actually got pieces of the grant money that kept this place running.

“You want some?” Bob asked, holding up his styrofoam cup.

I always did when I got here, and I always held off. If I started, then I wouldn't be able to sleep when I got home, and I wasn't getting enough sleep as it was. I'd get home somewhere around four, watch the sun come up through my apartment windows, and hope I could doze off around eight or so. If I was lucky, I slept through to my alarm at one, but sometimes I was up before noon, pacing, heading onto the street myself, looking for a bit of excitement before the work dragged me in again.

“Thanks but no,” I said.

His grin got wider. I liked his grin. It made those scars look like something ritual instead of something left by the shrapnel that got him sent home from Nam in the first place.

“I dunno how you do it, girl,” he said, “always so cheerful no matter how late. I'd be barking people's heads off if I done as much as you.”

“What's she do?” Klepto pocketed his knife, pretending disinterest.

My stomach clenched. He was here for me—he had been made that clear off-and-on the last few weeks—and I was having none of it. No one'd even tell him my name, and someone always made sure my bike and I got far away before Klepto went back onto the street.

“She come here every night,” Bob said, “and put up with assholes like you.”

I had to look down so that Klepto wouldn't see my grin.

“You got some problem tonight, or you just here to harass the women?” Bob asked.

Klepto held up his left hand, which had been in his pocket the entire time. A filthy bandage was wrapped around it, and it looked like something was oozing from underneath.

Then I caught the smell: rotted and foul. Infection of some kind. My eyes watered.

“You check in with Holiday?” I asked.

“He wrote my stuff down, handed it to Doc Steve,” Klepto said.

“He tell the doc you smell like Swamp Thing?” Bob asked.

Klepto raised his chin. “I ain't one of those stinkin' street people.”

“The wound,” I said. “Or whatever it is. It's infected.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Klepto said. “Why'd you think I'm here?”

To harass me, I thought, but didn't say nothing about it. Because if he had a legit reason to sit on that bean bag chair, I wasn't gonna argue with him.

Judy sighed and rolled over, her arm flopping toward the floor. She was just a bitty thing, and if she'd come to SFG, we'd've handed her over to social services. But here, we weren't supposed to truck with the Man. Confidentiality no matter what was the thing. So no social services, no lists for the police, and nothing for the parents who'd been calling since the so-called Summer of Love looking for their missing kids.

Every night I saw Judy asleep on that couch, wearing the same ratty army jacket that Bob'd given her in

March when she first showed up, her bare feet black with street goo, I wondered where she came from and who was missing her.

Because it was pretty clear to me, even if no one else seemed to truck to it, that she was sleeping here because it was the safest place in a very scary neighborhood, maybe the only place that'd made her feel welcome since she ran away from home.

"You gonna tell Doc Steve I'm still waiting?" Klepto asked me.

I started. Bob frowned at me, then headed back to the door, giving me the signal: If he troubles you, Bob said the first time he gave me that look, you find me right away. I'll show him who's the Man around here.

I nodded to Bob, just to show him I remembered, then said to Klepto, "I thought Holiday checked you in."

"An hour ago," Klepto whined. For a guy who made his living on the street, selling everything from STP to smack and who knew how to use that knife like a paintbrush, he whined a lot.

"When he gets done, I'll let him know," I said. Then I organized the check-in sheets, double-checking that we had as many sheets as we had patients in the waiting room. Jefferson Airplane was blaring through the speakers now, and I shivered a little. I took my one and only trip to the Airplane—another concert, this one at the Avalon Ballroom—and I'd accidentally drank some LSD-spiked punch. That was before I'd ever been to the clinic, so I didn't know about the calm center where someone could talk you down no matter what was going on, and I'd ridden my bike home, seeing phantoms and demons screaming at me in the fog and waving their tentacles from the windows of cars.

I don't know how I made it to my apartment or how long it took to get there. I do know I was afraid I'd get fired from my work-study job for missing a day without reporting, but students were doing that all the time by then, so I got a pass.

That was nearly two years ago. It was the scariest night of my life, and nothing, not even a knife fight in the bathroom here at the clinic, freaked me out more. I never voluntarily touched any junk, and I no longer drank stuff people just handed to me, not even people I trusted like Soldier Bob. But I was kinda grateful for the experience. I understood, on some deep level, what the kids who staggered in here shouting that their bodies were on fire, were going through.

Finally, the door to the nearest exam room opened. Doc Steve came out, clutching a chart. He stopped in the hall, scribbled something on the outside of the chart, then waited.

A biker came out of the room, slipping his leather vest over his bare chest. His right arm was wrapped in bandages and his face was pale.

Doc Steve, half the biker's size and one-third his weight, just stayed in the hall, like he always wrote his notes on flimsy cardboard folders while standing right there. I knew what he was doing because I seen it before. He was guarding the way to the supply cabinet, just in case the biker'd heard we had drugs on premise.

"You'll come back?" Doc Steve asked. "I'll need to take the stitches out in two weeks."

The biker nodded.

Then Doc Steve handed him a prescription paper—something we don't do a lot—and said, "Hydrogen peroxide. It'll keep the wound clean. I wrote it down for you. You can get it at any drugstore."

“Nothing for the pain, man?” The biker seemed confused.

Doc Steve shook his head. “It’s not serious enough that you’ll need anything heavy. Just keep it clean, and you’ll be fine.”

The doc’s been here from the beginning, and he was the first to learn that guys like that biker would cut themselves up just to get pain med prescriptions. Then they’d get the meds, cut them up and split them between a bunch of capsules, and sell the diluted stuff on the black market. Or mix the medication with something else, like powdered cleaner, and we’d see the results right here a few nights later, kids with some kind of poisoning bad enough at times that we had to send them to a real emergency room.

We try to be responsible. The county’s trying to close us and the other free clinics down, and they’re looking for any excuse. Doc Steve spends his days at the UC Medical Center, and he says more drugs get stolen from there than anywhere else. But those places get to stay open. Us, we get closed down if there are too many junkies lined up on the street, waiting for treatment.

The biker left, grumbling about the hydrogen peroxide, and Doc Steve came into reception. He put his hand on my shoulder like he does every night, and squeezed slightly like he does every night, and I grinned at him like I do every night, even though I wished he’d stop. I’m not one for being touched—at least not by a guy who’s interested in me and I’m not interested in him. But I knew part of the move was for Klepto, a possessive thing to show Klepto who he’d mess with if he ever got too close to me, and that I kinda appreciated.

“What’ve we got?” Doc Steve said by way of greeting.

I handed him Klepto’s chart, and the doc raised his eyebrows at me. “He’s got a bandage on his hand, and Soldier Bob says it smells like Swamp Thing.”

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?” Doc Steve said with that heartiness he always used for patients he didn’t like.

“I been waiting an hour,” Klepto said.

“It’s just me and Clahorn tonight,” Doc Steve said. “Sometimes we get backed up.”

I’d been there for nearly a half an hour, and I hadn’t seen Doc Clahorn yet. I liked him better than Doc Steve. Doc Clahorn didn’t try to go all cool on us. He wore his tie and his lab coat and his black horn-rim glasses, but he didn’t judge anybody. He just saw all the patients as if they were just as good as the rich folks he saw at his practice downtown.

Doc Steve took Klepto to the back. Judy snorted in her sleep. The two guys kept playing cards, like nothing had happened, and the girl sat on the edge of her seat, staring at the edge of the desk like it held the secrets of the universe.

I’d guess she was on mushrooms or LSD, just from the way she was acting. But I’d learned long ago not to ask if someone was here because they were having a bad trip. Sometimes the words “bad trip” were enough to trigger one.

So I grooved as KSAN added some Dylan to that night’s repertoire, and prayed, like I always did, for a quiet shift.

Didn’t get it.

Not five minutes later, the front door banged open and some girl came in, wearing three layers of

ponchos and swinging a package in her arm like it was a shield that'd ward off the Devil. Soldier Bob hurried after her, looking panicked for the first time since I met him, and he grabbed for the package, swearing every time he missed.

The girl was screaming nonsense words. Judy woke up on the couch, and the guys stopped playing cards. They moved away from the coffee machine—maybe afraid it would fall on them in the middle of all this—and the other girl, the one that'd been studying the desk, let out a matching scream of her own.

I got up and went for the girl closest to me. I figured Bob and the poncho-lady could settle their score on their own. I wrapped my arms around the other girl, who was bent in half, hands to her long brown hair, screaming and screaming, and I dragged her into the calm center.

She nearly knocked over a bunch of candles. But Rick was toward the back, apparently working with those three other junkies, and he came to the front of the room and pulled this girl from me like she's six years old.

She's blubbering now, and I'm rubbing her back, and we're both trying to get her to take a breath—one simple little breath—that just might be the first step to calm.

“Got her,” Rick said to me over her sobs. “Sounds like shit's going down. They probably need you.”

I didn't need to be told twice. I been through this more times than I can think about—except it's usually the speed freaks who're screaming the place up.

Which didn't mean the girl outside wasn't one. And if she was on meth or STP or some other kind of upper, she might be extra strong too.

I headed back out, meeting Holiday in the hallway. He was clutching his cleaning bucket like it had all his weaponry. He grinned at me—some of the folks who work here are real adrenaline junkies—and then he flanked me as we headed into reception.

The two guys were huddled against the wall, heads down. The girl was still swinging her whatever and Bob's eyes were as big as his mouth as he kept reaching for the thing.

“Get her,” he said when he saw us. “Get her!”

Holiday dropped the pail, and we both charged forward. I slid under those swinging arms, and slammed against her belly—which was surprisingly hard—and Holiday went for her feet.

We knocked her off balance, but Bob didn't catch her like he was supposed to. Instead, he grabbed the thing in her hands.

She went over like a linebacker, slamming against the floor with a thud that must've echoed through the whole neighborhood.

“Jesus.” Holiday shot Bob a glare. “What're you thinking, man?”

I crawled forward and checked to see if her head was bleeding. Nothing that I could see. She was breathing, too—good thing, since the last thing we wanted was a patient dying of some random head-injury because she came to the free clinic for help.

We still weren't in the clear, but it was a start.

“Hey!” Holiday said to Bob. “I was talking to you.”

But Bob wasn't listening. He cradled that baggage in his arms like it was something precious. I stood up, off to get Doc Steve or Clahorn, whoever wasn't too busy, when I caught a look at Bob's face.

It was tear-streaked.

He extended the package to me, and that's when I realized it wasn't no package at all. It had eyes, a nose, and a little tiny mouth, all in a skeletal face.

"It's alive," he said, and in his voice, I heard relief.

I took the baby from him, unwrapped enough of the swaddling to determine it was a girl and she was filthy, too-thin, and too sick to cry. She smelled of filthy diapers and dirty adult skin—typical junkie's baby. I'd seen too many of those down here too.

I carried her to Doc Steve's exam room—I didn't care if Klepto was dying of gangrene; someone had to look at this little thing first—and opened the door. Klepto had his arm on the silver table, Doc Steve on the other side of him, suturing him up. Klepto gave me a surprised look, and Doc Steve frowned.

I didn't say anything, just brought her to him. Doc Steve set the suture needle down, washed his hands in the nearby sink, then peered at her little face—

—and yanked her out of my arms so fast, I nearly fell over. He ran with her toward the door.

"What about me?" Klepto yelled.

"She'll take care of you," Doc Steve said as he disappeared down the hallway. He was heading toward our only well-equipped care room—as close to a surgery as we could have in this building. The docs tried to keep it empty for moments just like this.

"She?" Klepto said softly, as if he knew the doc couldn't hear him.

"Me," I said with more bravado than I felt. The smell of that baby lingered on me. There was a touch of spit-up on my arm. I shivered—some things still shook me, and uncared-for babies were one of them—and walked to the sink.

As I lathered up, I heard Klepto's chair slide back. "You ain't no doc," he said.

"I don't have to be." I patted my arms dry with paper towels just like the docs had taught me. "This is something even you could do."

He was standing now, the suture needle hanging, literally, by a thread from his arm. The cut was a long jagged one. Doc Steve had obviously cleaned it, and had been trying to get it to heal up.

"Sit," I said.

Klepto grinned. "I so love it when chicks boss me around."

I normally would've objected to the word "chick," but I didn't here. I tried to be professional, even though there was some yelling coming from the calm center, and Bob's voice, sounding edgy and frightened, coming from reception.

Like a war zone, Old Doc Hartspall at SFG had said when he told me about the free clinic. He'd been trying to talk me out of coming here, trying to talk me out of medicine really, because he thought girls should stay home, have babies and take care of their men.

Like a war zone. And in war zones, the docs worked no matter what was going on around them.

I glared at Klepto. “Sit,” I said again.

This time he did, and put his arm back. I grimaced as I pulled the suture thread out from under his skin. “It’s not sterile any more.”

He shrugged. “Just finish.”

Instead, I grabbed some rubbing alcohol, and resterilized the thread as best I could. Then I took the needle, dropped it into a solution, and got another needle from the drawer. If I was going to finish this, I would finish it right.

The cut went deeper than it initially looked. It ran along the back of his hand, somehow missing all the important stuff.

“You’re lucky this didn’t hit anything vital,” I said. “You might’ve lost the use of your hand.”

“Doc Steve said that.” Klepto wasn’t looking at me as I sewed. I kinda liked suturing. That’s where my traditional feminine training hit the medical training. Nice, neat stitches, making sure everything fit just so.

“You wanna tell me how this happened?” I wasn’t just making conversation. I was curious how the wound got infected so fast.

Even though we couldn’t go to any authorities, we could advise our patients on how to avoid high-risk behaviors. Sometimes, we even made a difference.

“I told Doc Steve I forgot,” Klepto said, still not looking at his arm.

“Is that true?” I asked.

“For now,” Klepto said. “You go out with me tomorrow night, maybe I’ll tell you something different.”

“Gotta work tomorrow,” I said, tying off the stitches. Then I got the scissors and cut the thread.

I glanced over my shoulder. No Doc Steve. More shouting, though, and a couple of new voices. Thought I even heard Doc Clahorn getting involved.

“You don’t know how to finish this up?” Now Klepto was watching me, and he was looking worried.

“I don’t know what Doc Steve planned,” I said. “I’m gonna ask him.”

“How about going out when you get off work?” Klepto asked.

I’d learned not to tell him I was going to go to sleep or to bed or even home. His innuendo never quit.

“I’m never off work any more,” I said with a more realistic sigh than I wanted.

Then I headed into the hall. Rick had his arm around Bob and was leading him back to reception. Bob shot me a deep frown, and I frowned back at him. How come he wasn’t at the door?

And Rick shoulda been in the calm center. He had at least five patients; he shoulda been watching them.

I peered into reception. The two guys were gone—maybe in Doc Clahorn’s room, maybe they split when things got dicey. Judy had gone back to sleep. She looked very small on that couch, all curled up, her knees almost pulled to her chest.

Then I went toward our main care room. I pulled open the door, only to see both docs bent over that very tiny form. They were working so hard, they didn't even see me.

I pushed the door closed. Doc Steve wouldn't care about Klepto's wound, not now, maybe not much before he came in. Klepto was chronic, and hard to avoid, and difficult even on good days.

I went back to his room, deciding to pretend I'd talked to Doc Steve. It gave me more authority. I cleaned the wound one more time, then wrapped it in gauze, and taped the bandage closed.

"You ain't gonna do nothing else?" Klepto asked.

"You come back tomorrow night," I said. "Doc Steve'll figure out what to do then."

"I'll just wait for him now," Klepto said.

"He said tomorrow." I made sure I used the same kind of quiet authority the doc did. "It's better that way."

"Some emergency, huh?" he asked.

I nodded, just once, trying not to think about how light that baby had been in my arms. Most babies, when you hold them, are solid little creatures, with pliable skin—almost like that plastic skin on the baby dolls they sell these days. But this baby was all bone and fabric, its little body so fragile that I'd been afraid to even hold it close without harming it.

"You gotta keep that really clean," I said, nodding at his bandage. "No dirt, no nothing on it. We'll change the bandage tomorrow, but if it gets too filthy, come in the morning. Someone'll take care of it."

"Or what?" Klepto asked.

"Or that infection'll spread." Then I frowned. "Doc give you a shot already?"

"No pain killers," Klepto said. "I heard him talking to that biker."

I smiled. "Penicillin shot. He do that?"

Klepto held out his other arm. There was a fresh track in the inside of the elbow. "He was gonna give me pills."

Here, I couldn't dispense those. And I didn't want to go near the supply closet with Soldier Bob acting weird, Rick away from the Calm Center, and both docs attending that baby.

"Either come back in the morning, or when Doc Steve gets here tomorrow night. The first shot should hold you until then."

"You got it, gorgeous." Klepto grinned at me, a sideways grin that made him look like the teenager he probably was. You could almost see the possibilities in him when he grinned like that—what he would've been like before he went all psycho.

But I remembered the thousand times he'd smiled at me when the grin didn't even make his eyes. Those times, he'd sent little shivers of fear through me, no matter how hard I tried to ignore them.

Sometimes I wondered if Klepto was a hoodie because he was psycho, not that he became psycho after the drugs and the life of crime, like Doc Steve believed. Sometimes I wondered if people didn't just go to the life they'd been destined for all along.

“If I come back tomorrow night, you’ll be here, right?” Klepto asked.

I sighed. I’d already set that up. “You come back before I get here. Doc Steve shows up about seven. You come then.”

“And miss my best girl?” Klepto asked.

“If you want to keep that arm,” I said as ominously as I could.

“You don’t got the tone,” he said. “Maybe someday you’ll scare the bejesus outta somebody, but you don’t do it yet.”

Then he reached across the table and, before I could move away, ran the back of his fingers along my cheek. I struggled not to grimace. My skin crawled.

“Can’t thank you enough, beautiful,” he said. Then he got up, rapped his good hand on the tabletop, gave me a long glance, and left.

I stayed in my chair just a moment too long. My knees were jelly. I had been able to stem my disgust when I worked on Klepto—that’s how I knew I was getting close to being a real professional, I could shut the feelings off—but I couldn’t suppress the real reactions, not all the way.

I wanted to shower, just to get the feel of his hand off my skin.

I settled for scrubbing my face, my hands, and my own arms, a little more vigorously than I’d initially planned.

Finally, I stepped out into the hallway in time to see Holiday take the ambulance keys off the emergency peg. His gaze met mine, his eyes frightened.

“The baby?” I asked.

He nodded. “I’m supposed to pull around.”

“You want me to drive?”

He shook his head. “Doc Clahorn’s going with me. They already decided you’d stay.”

I let out a small sigh of relief. We didn’t have an ambulance—not really—just an ancient Ford station wagon someone had donated that did duty as best it could. It did have amazing speed, though, which’d come in handy more than once.

“The baby gonna live?” I asked.

Holiday shrugged. “Not my place to ask.”

Which was answer enough. Any death here, while understandable and even medically explainable, brought the health department down on us. Even though they should’ve been our greatest ally, they were our biggest enemy.

But the baby was gonna die, unless someone could perform a medical miracle, and I didn’t think any emergency room in driving distance had that kind of mojo. And this was where our mission sometimes confused me.

Because if that girl had come into SFG’s emergency room, swinging her baby like it was a jug of water,

that girl woulda been in custody, her house raided, and her other kids—if she had any—given to the county so that they'd have a chance at surviving.

But the docs here decided long ago that we'd do none of that. Since much of what we saw was the result of crime—drug addiction, theft, and all kinds of violence—we had to be non-judgmental or the people who needed us wouldn't come, for fear of being given over to the Man.

That pissed me off at first. I thought we were supposed to stop problems, not add to them. So I argued basic medicine with the docs—first do no harm—and when I did, Doc Clahorn'd said, "Exactly," like I'd been agreeing with them. Doc Steve, seeing my confusion, had said, "It goes like this: what's the worse harm? Never getting treatment because you're afraid of authority? Or getting some? We're taking risks here, but I think the benefits outweigh them."

Tell it to that baby, the one who wouldn't make it through the night. That girl who birthed him would leave this place free and clear, off to her other kids or to have other kids, if she survived whatever drug she was on. Free, clear, and not responsible.

I clenched my fists as hard as I could so I wouldn't say nothing. It wasn't Holiday's fault. He was just driving to emergency.

I didn't go near the main care room—I didn't want to think about that baby more than I would (although the feel of that warm, breakable frame in my arms would wake me in the middle of almost every night since)—so I went to reception instead.

Judy still slept, her skinny face peaceful. KSAN was playing Steve Miller, and it felt wrong for the ambience of this place. I almost got up and shut the radio off, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

It wasn't the music that was off; it was everything, from the lack of bodies in the waiting room, to the silence coming from the calm center. I got up in time to see Doc Clahorn head down the back steps, babe in arms. I walked in the care center door, not quite sure what I was going to do when I stepped inside, and bumped into Soldier Bob.

He grabbed my arms so hard that his fingers ripped into the thin gauze of my peasant shirt.

"You don't need to be here," he said, his eyes dark and glittery. He pushed me, literally pushed me, back into the hallway.

"You don't either," I said. "You're supposed to be at the door."

He glanced at the nearly empty waiting room, the closed front door. His grip on my arms loosened, and his shoulder sagged. The fluorescent light didn't flatter his face the way the candlelight had. He looked harsh and broken, a man sewn together on a battlefield, quickly and not very well.

"What's the point?" he whispered, and I wasn't sure he was talking to me. "What's the friggin' point?"

I didn't answer. I knew better. I'd tried once and he'd shaken me so hard someone had had to pull me away.

"This's supposed to be home," he said. "White picket fences and apple pie. This kinda thing ain't supposed to happen here."

He'd given me this speech before, about how he'd gone to defend freedom only to come home and discover it never really existed. We'd had long talks in the deep darkness, and never really come to any resolve. And it didn't do any good to remind him that it'd always happened here. He knew that a lot

better than I did.

He shook himself, let his hands fall off my arms. I pretended that I wouldn't be bruised, and if he'd noticed the holes in the shirt, I'd say they were there when I found the thing in the Diggers' free box.

"You still saying no to coffee?" He was looking down on me, like I was something he had to take care of. But there was understanding in his eyes too, understanding that I wouldn't sleep tonight, caffeine or no.

"Lemme make it for us," I said, keeping to my rule of not accepting anything from anyone. "You like sugar, right?"

He nodded, glanced at the calm center, then sighed. I looked too—I couldn't help it. Through the thin light of the candles, I saw Rick sitting cross-legged in front of the junkies, trying to talk them down.

I didn't know how he did it, treating that skinny ponchoed bitch like she was anybody else, like she hadn't forgotten to feed her child, like she hadn't used it like a piece of wood.

Only I did know what he'd say. He'd say, "Anybody ask why she came here in the first place? Do you know if it's her child? What if, in her bleary state, she saw what was going on in her crash pad, rescued the child, and brought it here to save it? Have you thought of that?"

He'd said similar stuff before.

The coffee was brown sludge. Milk made it light brown sludge. Sugar—which I taste-tested first—made it drinkable.

Bob thanked me, took a sip from his, then headed back to the front door. He gave me one last look with those sad eyes, and I knew someday he'd go through that door, close it quietly, and never come back.

But not that night. That night he stayed until the reinforcements arrived.

I was wired when I scrounged my bike from the basement. Wired and surprised to see Holiday asleep on those moldy newspapers. I had no idea that he'd come back. He looked young curled up there, not even as old as Judy, and much, much sadder.

I couldn't bear to wake him up, to have him confirm what we already knew—that the baby wasn't gonna live through the night. The lines on Holiday's once-smooth face told me that much.

So I picked up the bike as quietly as I could, carried it up the stairs and out the back. Someone sat on the stoop near the sidewalk, and I froze, thinking it was Klepto.

It'd be just like him to try to come home with me out of some kind of misguided thanks for the piss-poor job I'd done with that wound of his. And this time, there was no Soldier Bob, no wide-awake Holiday, no one who knew I was standing here, staring at Klepto, blocking my way in the dark.

Then he turned, and I realized it wasn't Klepto at all, but Doc Steve, just sitting there waiting for—what?

He stood when he saw me. "I can give you a ride," he said, but the offer was only half-hearted this time.

"Got my bike," I said.

"Someday you're gonna get hurt." By rote. He wasn't thinking of the words.

"I'll be all right." I carried my bike down to the sidewalk, then set it down on what remained of the

grass.

He was staring into the fog forming at the edge of the street. “Funny how we all say that. We’re gonna be fine. Like we know it. Like we believe it.”

I shivered. I’d never heard him express doubts before.

“She died, didn’t she?” I asked because I couldn’t not ask. Because, I realized in that moment, I’d held just a tiny grain of hope.

He nodded, still staring at that fog.

His silence unnerved me. He was always the secure one, the guy who came in the next day whistling after a particularly bad night, the guy who let us know that no matter what, we were fighting the good fight.

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“When you came on,” he said, straightening his shoulders, “you said do no harm.”

I held my breath, wondering if he was going to violate his own rule. Was he going to turn that woman in? That would change the clinic and its guidelines forever, make us someplace else, someplace a little more mainstream than we’d been before.

I wasn’t sure that was a bad thing.

“And I keep thinking,” he said, “how it’s not us that does the harm. We get the results, after the harm’s already been done.”

He looked at me sideways. His face was wet with fog or dew, and he seemed more tired than I’d ever seen him.

Then he put his hand on my shoulder, and squeezed, and this time it wasn’t possessive. It was needy and supportive all at the same time.

“Some nights are harder than others,” he said, and let me go.

I stood beside him for a few more minutes, but there was nothing more to say. Finally I got on my bike, coasted down the sidewalk, bumped over the curb and onto the street.

No one followed me, no one shouted after me. Once I got past the clinic, no one even saw me in the fog.

I went home and realized I hadn’t changed back into my street clothes. I took off the peasant blouse and the jeans, stuffed them in a bag, and tossed them under the sink. Then I took a long, hot shower, trying to wash the smell of filthy diapers, old coffee, and spit-up off my skin.

I failed, though. I still smell it, midnights at that quiet time. I smell it and think about it and evaluate it.

Most folks, they’d run screaming from this place. Maybe I will too. Maybe I’ll retreat to research like a couple of the docs have done, or lose the dream of medicine altogether like a few of the volunteers.

But it’s Old Doc Hartspall from SFG who keeps me here. Not because of his prejudice, trying to drive a girl from a place he thought she didn’t belong. And not trying to prove to him that I’m stronger than he thought.

Nope. I've been starting to think that Old Doc Hartspall was right.

This is the heart and soul of medicine. Right here, where babies die and the junkies who forgot to feed them get talked down, where damaged soldiers guard the door while they try to hold themselves together, and lost little girls sleep on the couch because they have no place else to go.

I'm not smug any more. I don't think this is about the most interesting life a girl could ever have. But I think it's where this girl should be, stitching and bandaging as best she can, hoping to stem the tide, trying not to add to the harm that's already been done.

It's easy to walk away. It's harder to stay. Old Doc Hartspall knew that. And he probably knew that if I had the stomach to stay here, I had the stomach to bend over a dying baby in the middle of the night and fight—even if I knew I was going to lose.

I try not to think about success any more. I focus on the patients in the front room, and keeping the radio on KSAN, and preventing anyone from feeding me coffee. I keep my wits about me, and I hope I can sleep, and I try not to mind when I don't.

I remind myself that this is what I want.

And for the moment, at least, I'm listening.