



Winner of the
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Prose Contest
with
Benjamin Percy

Katherine Shelton

Stained



Winner

The large conference room, normally housing lectures, had been colonized by unfamiliar persons. Volunteers checked donors in and offered battered, laminated pages detailing any juvenile or scientific question on the process of blood donation. The recovery center was at a desk on the opposite wall, furnished with granola bars, cookies, and enough bottled water to shorten the planet's life expectancy by a few years. Nurses scurried to and fro, retrieving necessities at a communal table in the center of the room, assessing possible donors behind portable walls, wiping and sticking donors at gurneys, and repeating the process.

This particular room and setup was familiar enough for Ms. Nuja. She had travelled around site to site within the city, seeing so much that all the individual portraits morphed into a broad mural. It hung like a tapestry in the back of her mind and there she let it expand, each addition seeming smaller in its accumulated growth until the majesty was lost entirely.

A young man, perhaps an older boy, practically skipped into the room. It was not only his pink shoelaces that gave off a distinct air

of femininity. The other nurses gave a collective, small frown. This group, Nuja acknowledged with a groan, disliked turning people away. She, however, was seasoned; the worst case scenario was that the stranger walked away with all of his blood.

Still, even people at the front desk who got a glimpse of his bony hands were polite and committed to procedure. Nuja would do the same.

“Would you like a free T-shirt?” the acne-ridden volunteer chirped.

“Oh!” the young man was taken aback by the honor, “No, thank you very much, Miss! I don’t need it.”

The girl took another look over the missing buttons in his shirt. “I think we have your size, though.”

“You’re so nice,” his voice was like melting butter, “But no, I won’t need it.”

Nuja approached the conversing pair and addressed the boy, “First time donor?”

“Yes, Miss,” he drew his too-long sleeves back over his jutting elbows before immediately pulling his sleeves back down again.

Ms. Nuja raised her eyebrows in response. Gentility had long been squelched from her in an effort to be taken seriously, resulting in strangers typically calling her “ma’am” over “Miss.” She was flattered by this boy’s deviance from the norm-- ideologically flattered, not romantically. Only now was she beginning to feel sorry for the emaciated, presumably gay boy. His eagerness buzzed off of his skin. “Well, you can follow me back when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now, if you don’t mind, Miss. Not to rush you! I only meant I could go if you would rather not wait around.” He looked horrified with his tongue-tied state, his giddiness draining from him. “Or maybe you’d rather have a break. I’m sorry, just do whatever you want.”

Ms. Nuja stared at him a moment, trying to discern if she believed he was spineless or simply too polite. But in the end, it made little difference. “Come on,” she said, and led him back behind a portable wall she had helped set up earlier that day. On the other side sat two chairs and a computer with a list of reasons why he could not donate. She could think of a couple reasons more than the automated system. For example, a grinning boy who wore thin clothes in the winter had no business giving anything away.

Still, Nuja sat down in her chair and began the online survey. “I’m going to have to ask you a few questions.” She glanced up at

him, his weight teetering between his feet as he bashfully scanned the floor. "You can sit," she offered.

"I may?" his blistered lips smiled a touch too widely, and started to bleed a little. "Thank you, Miss."

The power of the word "Miss" started to nauseate her. "Please, call me Fola. Or Ms. Nuja." She cut him off before he could apologize, "First, your name?"

"Katurian P. Napels."

Nuja suppressed a smile. It was always a pleasure to find others in the "say that again?"-name category. "Spell that for me?"

He obeyed, and additionally set his ID on the table. From this, she gathered that he had recently turned 18.

"Happy belated birthday, Katurian."

"Thank you, Miss Fola Nuja."

Most of the general information was fine. He seemed to hesitate over an address before he simply pointed to the one on his identification. Nuja paused over his height and weight, an irrational guilt resonating in her gut.

Katurian scratched the back of his head knowingly, ruffling up his already messy, brown bowl-cut. "I guess I'm a little underweight..."

That was an understatement. His skin appeared to struggle in stretching over his bones. "Yes. I'm afraid this could be a problem."

"Why, exactly?" he leaned forward in his chair, his wide eyes looking all the larger.

Again, Nuja hesitated. "For your own wellbeing."

Katurian nodded slowly, "Is that the only reason?"

"Isn't that reason enough?"

Katurian smiled, that dab of blood from his lips smearing slightly over his crooked teeth. "Next question?"

Nuja sighed, sounding almost sympathetic. "I'm afraid there's no need. I'm not legally allowed to put you in harm's way, it goes against the entire purpose."

Katurian's soft eyes darkened in an instant. "No, Miss, I insist."

He did nothing actively threatening, but at the very least, Nuja no longer believed he was a pushover. He did not look eager to fight, per se, but she caught sight of a reservoir of power inside of this boy. It knocked her off her game. "Katurian, I could lose my job if I don't turn you away at this point."

His jaw twitched strangely, all nuances of which were visible in his starved face. "I want to save a life."

"Save yours."

His entire demeanor greyed. They stared at one another in complete disillusionment. At last, he stood, and Nuja sat up a bit straighter. She picked up his ID and reached out to return it to him. The barrel of a gun was positioned directly in front of her left eye. Katurian cocked the small pistol.

“I’m terribly sorry,” his voice wavered, but his hand did not. “I really insist we go through with this, Miss.”



She did not ask why this was so important. She did not cry for help. She was not going to argue or barter. She was going to get through this nightmare as briskly as possible. Her life was the goal, and so she was perfectly obedient, even if she trembled.

They got through health history questions without any problems. Midway through, Katurian put his gun back in his pocket, under the too-long shirt. He sat back in his chair, drawing his knees to his chest. He was a child, which terrified her to her core.

“Have you had homosexual intercourse?” Nuja queried softly.

Katurian frowned. “Consenting or not?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The boy flinched. “Seems like it should matter.”

Nuja clicked her tongue indifferently, “I’ll just say no. That one is left over from the AIDS scare anyway.”

After completing a few more questions and lying about his weight, Nuja stopped. Adrenaline prevented exhaustion, but she was still perplexed into idleness.

“What’s wrong?” Katurian asked.

She looked at him flatly and whispered, “Aside from my life being threatened?”

He bit his lip. “I’m really sorry about that. But you were gonna make me leave.”

“I can’t just start draining your blood out there. You’re obviously ineligible. And I’m not sure how much is safe to take from you.”

Katurian drummed his fingers on his knees anxiously. “Well, I can help you with the last one. You’re going to take it all.”

Nuja momentarily forgot how to breathe. “You’re making me murder you?”

“But I don’t want you to get in trouble or anything. Maybe you could bring the gurney back here, say I’m embarrassed but wanna donate? I’ll write a note to let everyone know I’m okay with this, that

I'm making you. Sign it and everything. Will that work?"

"You're making me murder you."

Katurian's smile was patient. "If you don't mind, Miss, I would appreciate it. I *was* going to just do it the old-fashioned way, with razorblades. Only that felt like a terrible waste."

"Katurian..." She didn't think to wonder why he wouldn't use the gun in his pocket.

"Can you imagine?" His words bounced. "All that blood just... wasted. I have enough iron and I'm not sick."

"You *are* sick," Ms. Nuja hissed.

Katurian pouted. "Not in a way that anyone else will catch."

"You need help," Nuja insisted with quiet, vicious urgency, "Just go home and talk to your parents--"

He looked sad, but not for himself, for Nuja. "I can't do that. You're kind of overestimating me, Miss. Nobody can stand to be near me, especially the people who had to have me." He offered his best smile. It was gorgeous despite everything. "Can we please just do this? It'll be over before you know it, promise."

"I'll take you," she promised, "to someone who can help you."

"*You're* going to help me."

They stared at one another. He reached a hand past his loose shirt and into his pocket. Her entire demeanor greyed. She would not let him point a gun at her again.

"Fine," she conceded. "I'll do it."



Just beyond her and Katurian's walled off corner of the room, everything ran smoothly. Two large, open, trusting entrances. Free gifts as one entered and as one exited. Not a hint of security. Not one camera in this massive room. All smiles and laughs and jokes out there. Nuja wanted to vomit.

Instead, she kicked up the locks on the wheels of a gurney and proceeded to push it back behind the fake wall. When she returned to the main, open area, another nurse approached her.

"What's going on?"

Nuja could only muster a head shake as she proceeded to transport the rest of her necessary materials.

Apparently, she reeked of trauma. The nurse grabbed her arm. "What is going on? Should I..." She faltered, trying to read Nuja's expression, "Do I need to call someone?"

Nuja nodded, simplicity lightening her slowly and then ferociously. She whispered, “911. Be subtle. He’s armed.” Nuja broke away from her grasp.

“What are you doing? Don’t go back!”

“If I don’t, he’ll come out here.” There was a certainty that was frightening and convincing in Nuja’s smile. “Just trust me.”



Nuja pushed back Katurian’s sleeve and turned his forearm in her small hands, looking for the perfect vein. Instead, she found several bruises and scars. They decorated his skin like an abstract painting. She stared breathlessly.

Katurian apologized in his inflection, “My left arm is just as bad.” He fidgeted uncomfortably, as if she was staring at his naked form. “Should I flex or something? Would that make it easier to find?”

“No, it’s alright,” Nuja assured him, her hands suddenly gentler, that breath rushing out of her all at once. “There’s not much place for them to hide, after all.”

After checking that he had no applicable allergies, she wiped his inner arm clean. As she prepared the needle, she habitually recited, “I’m sorry, this might leave a mark.” Katurian laughed, which brought her back to the present. Caught somewhere between a sob and a chortle, she punctured him, and screwed the proper tubing together.

Katurian gulped, transfixed by the image of his blood coursing out of him. “Jeez, that’s kinda scary looking.”

Nuja pulled up a chair beside him. “It would have been scarier with a razor blade.”

Katurian nodded distractedly, gaping at the artificial artery that extended out of him, pooling very cleanly and distantly from him.

The two sat in silence for a long time. The flow of blood began to slow, and before she could stop herself, she told him that opening and closing his fist would help speed up the process. Naturally, he obeyed, and within five minutes, he had given a pint.

“Guess my blood is dying to get out,” he joked.

“Mmhm,” Nuja responded humorlessly, clamping the tubing as she replaced this bag with a new one.

“A quarter of the way through, right? Something like that?”

“Yes, Mr. Napels.”

Katurian did not take particularly well to being addressed so formally. He ravenously pumped his hand in and out of a fist.

“I’m awful sorry, Miss Fola Nuja.”

She blinked. “What for?”

“You didn’t ask to get mixed up in this. I probably ruined your whole day.”

Her eyes locked on him. Katurian sheepishly shrugged and leaned his head back. “Never been dizzy sitting down before. It’s weird.”

Her gaze was merciless. He silenced himself for good under its pressure. His pumping dragged, until his hand merely stayed unfurled.

The realization leaked into Nuja’s consciousness like water into a steadily sinking lifeboat. Why would Katurian use razor blades if he had a working gun? Did he not have a working gun? What had he been threatening her with? Did he have no real ammunition with which to harm her after all? Had she been tricked?

Did he have no intention of hurting her all along?

It was too late. His eyelids drifted shut and his breathing slowed. Nuja jumped to her feet, clamping the tube, preventing any more blood from escaping.

By this point, cops arrived on the scene.

“No!” Nuja shrieked, standing in front of the battered, unconscious boy, “I changed my mind! I don’t need you, I need an ambulance!” She scooped up the blood bags and placed them on top of Katurian. “Put it back! It’s his, I’ll explain it all later, *just put it back in his little body right now!*”



When the boy was carried away on a stretcher, she was startlingly aware that that murale in her mind had a sharp, new focal point: a stain of Katurian P. Napels. And what was worse was that she had no legal right to ever know what became of him.

She had driven to different graveyards, looking for a new addition before she realized he could never afford it, if he would have even wanted something so honorable for himself to begin with. How would the hospital dispose of someone without a family, without a home? A quick google search illuminated that, if unclaimed, he would be sent to a private morgue and burned after thirty days. She was ready to call off work to hunt down every viable establishment within the city.

But then, he could have lived.

Even so, she found it easier to check if he had died than to even try to see him alive at the hospital. Because even though giving back a suicidal boy's life was right, it was still a betrayal.