



You did WHAT???

By

*Spencer Jepma*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...Spencer Jepma's, "Mistakes Were Made," is, at first glance, an innocuous piece of illness, of fear, and living with the choices that brought us to where we currently are. There is a tension in the lines, but you're not quite sure who is pulling the thread, there is a casualness that comes from a command of tone and character, and a smooth rhythm that is almost diametrically opposite the subject matter. Jepma's story is tangible for the way in which it handles fear and regret, and is literary in the sense of their command of audience and craft.*

*At first glance.*

*Our protagonist is hospitalized for diabetes. His nurses and doctors come and go with the ups and downs of his EKG machine. His disease has left him disabled, and, like the worst of diabetics, he now faces down a bonesaw (although I'm not too sure, honestly, if they still use those).*

*I'm reminded of tales from Bukowski about meeting his idol, John Fante. When he first met Fante had already been cut up from the knees down and diabetes had left him blind and dictating any writing he had left in him to his wife.*

*Dealing with disease in the face of the life you once knew leaves you fighting for what's left or dead, or, if you were already dead, as a husk with a barely beating heart.*

*"Mistakes Were Made," is a story that necessitates more than one glance.*

*Enjoy.*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

Stephen watches as a plastic face mask attached to some kind of plastic tube is slowly lowered towards his face. He feels the cold plastic form a seal around his mouth and he breathes in. Ten, nine... He thinks of the beach on Maui, or maybe in Mexico or in Italy. He thinks of holding hands with a woman as they walk along the beach, talking and laughing. He thinks of her running out into the water, shrieking because it's cold and her splashing him.

### **Mistakes Were Made**

Stephen sits in the bed as an endless stream of nurses and doctors file in and out of his room. They are talking to him and he nods when it seems appropriate but he isn't listening. He catches some words, sometimes. Foot, neuropathy, poor circulation, prep, recovery time, surgery, and the big one. The word he tries to ignore and pretend doesn't exist in any language known to man. A word that has no meaning. A word that if erased from human language Stephen would not think twice about it. Amputation. He hears someone say that word and he retreats further into himself, closing that door in his head to any emotion that word might bring up. A brunette is standing by his bed checking his vitals and making notes on a clipboard, she's pretty. She says something about O2 stats and Stephen closes his eyes, trying to put himself in any other room. Anywhere else in the world but here.

Here he is Stephen Hill, 43 years old, diabetic, fat and about to lose his left foot. Lose is too soft of a word to use here; he's about to have his foot sliced and sawed off his body. He tries to

imagine he is lying on a beach, preferably on Maui, but any beach will do. He has a hollowed-out pineapple filled with some kind of fruity drink and a mini umbrella in it. He is lounging in a lawn chair facing the ocean. He takes a sip of his drink and relishes the tartness of the pineapple and the burning of the rum as it goes down. Stephen looks down and sees his stomach has lost the excess pounds it once held. Now he has a flat stomach and the V shape that descends into his swim suit that women find so desirable. He smiles and takes another sip of his drink. The sun is beaming down on him and the crashing of the waves sends a salty mist into the air he can taste. What do they do with the foot once it's been removed?

The sound of a different nurse, not as pretty as the brunette, snaps him back to the present moment. She says they're ready, he doesn't respond. She says they're going to give him something to help him relax, he nods. He watches as she sticks a needle into his port and hits the plunger. Stephen can feel the effects as soon as she pulls the needle out. It's like the right hand of God has placed a warm blanket on him while the left reaches into his soul and takes away any feelings of fear or anxiety. This is fine, everything is fine. Take the foot, who cares, there's always the right one.

He floats above his bed as the nurses roll him towards the operating room. He spins around on a cloud of marshmallows giving no mind to the room that awaits him. Next thing he knows there is a man in a mask standing over him, he asks if Stephen is ready and Stephen laughs. The masked man nods to some unseen person or persons and then tells Stephen to breathe deep and count backwards from ten. Stephen looks to his right and sees a dozen floating faces in a window staring down at him. They are all men and all white and old. If he wasn't so medicated it might be terrifying but instead it is comical, and Stephen laughs again.

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Eight, seven... He thinks of a different beach, this one is cold and rocky. He is alone and each step he takes over the jagged rocks digs and cuts at his feet. He looks behind him and sees a trail of bloody footprints he has left. He tries to find the path off the beach but all he sees are sharp black rocks, they go on forever. The water is frigid and menacing. He doesn't want to go near it but the rocks are no better. His feet hurt.

Six, Five... The movement next to him and the sound of metal scrapping metal is the last thing he hears before blackness grabs him and pulls him under.

Incessant beeping, the feel of scratchy sheets, itching on his arm in the crease of his elbow. Consciousness comes back slowly. Stephen feels like someone has taken his brain and filled it full of sludge. Thoughts aren't processed properly but sensations are coming in. He doesn't know where he is and the beeping is annoying. He tries to open his eyes but they're glued shut, or maybe someone has taped 100-pound weights to each eyelid, either way he can't open them.

An eternity passes in the time it takes Stephen to count five beeps from wherever those are coming from. Why doesn't somebody turn that off? Another eternity passes before the 100 pound weights have been mercifully replaced by 20 pound weights and thoughts are starting to form more coherently in his brain. He's in the hospital, not sure why, the beeping are hospital machines monitoring something, and he is sedated.

Surgery? Something about surgery? Was his appendix taken out? Maybe. He doesn't feel any pain though.

The 20 pound weights are gone and Stephen tries to crack open his eyes. The light punches him in the face and drives a pick into his head. He tries again more slowly to allow his eyes to adjust. He sees machines with lines and numbers, tubes coming in and out of his arms, cream-colored blankets covering him, a light gray wall in front of him and a window to his right looking out into what appears to be an observation room with no one in it.

Surgery. The word sounds almost right but he knows he should be thinking of a different word. What word? Surgery on what? He feels around on his face and chest. He doesn't feel anything except an oxygen tube around his face and going into his nose. He can move both his arms so no surgery on his arms. He can't feel anything different. Surgery on what?

Then the word comes and he realizes why surgery almost sounded right. Amputation. Definitely a form of surgery but not quite the same. He had his foot cut off. The realization sends a shot of adrenaline through him, causing the machines on his left to beep faster. It all comes back to him now.

He had to have his left foot amputated due to complications because of his diabetes. He sits up and reaches forward to feel where his left foot used to be, to feel the stump. Instead, he finds a foot still attached. Weird. Is he wrong? His brain is certainly not firing on all cylinders right now, but he was sure it was his left foot. He feels again, still

there. He leans back in the bed trying to understand why he is here. If amputation wasn't right, why is he here? The beeping continues to blare on the machine next to him. Why can't someone shut that off?

The beeping of his machines seem to have caught the attention of a few nurses because they come rushing in. One is the cute brunette but the others are unfamiliar. They all stare at him a moment before a man, presumably the doctor because of the white coat, how cliché, comes in. He is holding a clipboard and has a stethoscope around his neck. He comes over to Stephen and pulls up a chair next to his left side, the nurses stand by the door, as if guarding it from anyone else who was to come in and intrude.

Stephen is looking around at the new faces in the room with him when the doctor starts talking. He listens as the doctor talks, his hands grasped together so tight they are turning white. One of the nurses comes over to the machine monitoring his heart and mutes it, it says 148 BPM. Stephen listens for as long as he can before he closes his eyes and tries to escape within himself. The doctor finishes talking and places a hand on Stephen's shoulder for a moment before

standing up, sliding the chair away, saying something to the nurses watching, and then they all leave.

When he is alone again Stephen reaches out and feels where his right foot used to be. It's not there anymore, just a stump. He closes his eyes and tries to go back to the Maui beach, to smell the salt water and feel the sun on him. He wants to see the pretty girls and lay in the sun drinking and eating. Instead, he is back on the rocky beach. It is cold and he is alone. He can't move forward or back, he can't move left or right, he is

stuck in place. Every direction is nothing but razor-sharp rocks and freezing water. The doctor's words echo around in his head. They bounce back and forth between his ears. Stephen didn't hear everything that was said but he understood more than he wanted to. We amputated the wrong foot.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *When I was on my lunch break at work one day I saw this article talking about different mistakes that were made during surgery; sponges and scalpels being left inside the patients, accidentally giving significantly more medicine than the patient required and one where a woman's arm was amputated and it should not have been. This made me think of what it would be like to have this happen to me, what would I be feeling or thinking before the surgery, what would I be thinking or feeling after? That article was the inspiration for this story. My literary influences are always changing depending on who I'm reading and who authors I am vibing with. Currently I am reading Cormac McCarthy, Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, H.P. Lovecraft and Shusaku Endo. I wanted the story to feel a bit dreamlike and hazy like one would feel before and after surgery. I hope that comes through. Enjoy!*

**AUTHOR BIO:** My name is Spencer and I live in California. I work at a substance abuse facility and in my free time like writing short stories. I recently was published in an online magazine called Black Petals which will come out in July. I hope you enjoy reading my story as much as I enjoyed writing it.