

# ROOM 310

By Peter J. Stavros

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**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *In the simplest possible language the author presents a moving, emotionally layered group portrait of a family coming together when one of their own is about to pass. It's easy to overplay this kind of story but Stavros keeps everything on an even keel. The voice rings with common familiarity and the elegiac tone that colours (Cdn. sp.) character, dialogue and description, is sustained throughout. The use of the third person passive—a challenging POV—is both wisely chosen and perfectly handled. All of which means if this looks simple and easy it's only because in Room 310 Stavros does really well what so many writers try to do and fail. The best writing is magic and he is a magician. His prose is like some kind of phonic elixir. Quote: His skin was ashen, and his hair had fallen out in curious clumps. He lay buried beneath a mound of warm blankets, tethered to monitors straight out of science fiction that blinked and beeped and flashed numbers that meant nothing to you, his body a pin cushion for needles and tubes.' This story, together with 'Ten Something in the Morning' which we published in Issue 2 (fiction) are included in Stavros's upcoming chapbook Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore from Etchings Press, for release this month (May). You can read more from this talented writer at [www.peterjstavros.com](http://www.peterjstavros.com)*

## Room 310

It was Room 310, where your father was, that year he had leukemia, that year you feared you would lose him, at the University Hospital in Lexington, the cancer wing named after some anonymous benefactor. You would visit him every Sunday, dutifully, your father's son, would make the hour or so drive east across I-64, no matter the conditions, no matter the circumstance (the flat tire), with a stack of newspapers and those sports magazines he liked. She went with you, every time, without question, without hesitation, and you had only recently started dating. It was fresh and alive between you two, new and exciting as you discovered each other, flutters in

your stomachs and sweaty palms, electric anticipation coursing through your veins. And you couldn't bear to be apart, even to the cancer wing at the University Hospital.

You father looked bad, he looked terrible, he looked at death's door, and that scared you, that terrified you, made you feel helpless and alone. You had never seen him that way before because he wasn't supposed to be that way. He was supposed to be strong and forceful and in control, the goddamn bear claw hammer in the tool box. Yet there he was, anything but. He was weak, and frail, disappearing inside the hollow shell of himself. His skin was ashen, and his hair had fallen out in curious clumps. He lay buried beneath a mound of warm blankets, tethered to monitors straight out of science fiction that blinked and beeped and flashed numbers that meant nothing to you, his body a pin cushion for needles and tubes. You understood how sick he was when he didn't bother to complain about the thermostat, the air conditioner running full blast, set at sixty-two. He wasn't who he was supposed to be and you feared you would lose him. But would he ever perk up when she walked in.

Your father was enamored of her, everything about her (but in all fairness, everyone was). There were just some people in this world who were powered by a special kind of energy. She was always the brightest light in the room, and especially a cramped white sterile room in the cancer wing at the University Hospital. When she walked in, your father would perk up and take notice, shoving your newspapers and magazines onto the metal side table along with the pink plastic water pitcher and cellophane bag of hard candies and the creased and tattered pictures of all those saints your mother prayed to. When she walked in, a smile escaped across your father's face, and you caught a glimpse of who he used to be, calling her "young lady" and "my sweetie" and other pet names you had never heard him say, and at first you figured it might have just been the medication – the morphine dripping, dripping, dripping – but you came to

realize it was because of her, because he was enamored of her, everyone was. He became who he used to be, if only briefly, if only during those fleeting few hours of your visits – laughing and chitchatting, catching up on gossip, what was happening at church, current events, local news, clichés about the weather – until the nurse ushered you out, telling you that he needed to rest, telling you that he needed another round of poison to try and kill the poison that was trying to kill him.

He hated to see her go (and you too probably though you wouldn't know) but he loved it when she left because she would lean over and stretch her arms wide, and hug him in this ridiculously affectionate yet genuine embrace, one dainty foot dangling off the linoleum floor, as if she had known him forever, as if he were her dad. She would just lean over and hug him like that, her small body, you would tease, appearing even smaller against your father, who was a big man despite the state he was in, the toxins eating away at him. He would try to hug her back, clumsy and awkward because he wasn't much of a hugger (no one in your family was) and as best he could tethered to those science fiction monitors (and you swore the blinking and beeping and flashing numbers sped up for a split-second). She hugged him as if she didn't want the hug to end, as if she would never hug anyone ever again, and you could tell your father loved it.

On your way back home, the hour or so drive west across I-64, you fell silent, brain addled by your apprehensions, hypnotized by the broken white line that flickered past like frames of Super 8 film. You craved a cigarette, just one deep, satisfying drag, for the stress, and the depression, and visiting someone in the hospital always made you crave a cigarette in some perverse way, perhaps a fucked-up show of resistance to the inevitable. You would turn on the radio, more out of habit (who listened to the radio anymore?), some white noise to drown out the monotone humming of the engine, since you couldn't talk, speechless, running it over and over

in your head what would happen if you lost him, if your father wound up dead. She respected your mood (and moodiness), and sat motionless, equally silent and still beside you.

On one of those drives back home, Foo Fighters came on the radio, “My Hero,” and you didn’t think you were listening to the radio (who listened to the radio anymore?), couldn’t recognize any songs before or after, but when that song came on, and you heard the refrain, you broke down, a subconscious response, a spontaneous emotional collapse, and you lost it, you absolutely lost it, and you cried – thick and guttural and choking. It was all you could do to drive, to keep the car on the road, on the right side of the broken white line. She reached across and placed a delicate hand on your shuddering shoulder (she smelled like spring flowers), and she squeezed in close towards you, and she whispered that everything would be alright. It was all she said – just that everything would be alright. And you believed her. And it was. And you always believed her when she said that everything would be alright. Until it wasn’t.

That night, lying in bed, staring up at the stucco ceiling, in the dark and quiet, her head on your chest, your arms wrapped tight, pressed up against her, soft and safe, warm skin against warm skin, you told her you loved her.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I was inspired to write this story from my own experience having visited my father in the cancer ward of a hospital. I wanted to depict the wild swing of emotions someone went through watching a loved one, and particularly a parent, suffer from a serious illness. Then when I was putting stories together for my chapbook, I felt that this piece fit in well with the extended narrative to provide some backstory for the protagonist. My literary influences are varied. Being from Louisville, and a former journalist, I’m a big fan of the immersive, gritty, energetic “gonzo” style of Hunter S. Thompson, who was born here. When it comes to creating conflict, especially through dialogue, I admire the plays of Sam Shepard, who also incidentally spent his later years in Kentucky, about an hour down the road from where I live.*

**BIO:** *Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. “Room 310,” and “Ten Something in the Morning” from Volume 2 of Fleas on the Dog, are from his forthcoming chapbook, Three in the Morning and You Don’t Smoke Anymore, which will be released this May by Etchings Press*

(<http://etchings.uindy.edu>). Peter is also a playwright who has had plays produced across the country. More can be found at [www.peterjstavros.com](http://www.peterjstavros.com) and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros.