

I am a Machine Boy

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I am a machine boy. A machine chooses whether I live or get taken by the shadows; so does God. My mom prays louder and stronger than anyone else; I know God hears her clearly. “Make it so my boy lasts through the night. Let him grow up God.” Mom doesn’t know I listen to her prayers.

The machine has a clear plastic tube that connects me to it, and it to me. It’s my umbilical cord. Bags of clear liquid hang from hooks above the machine like a baby mobile. The more bags, the more plastic hoses that go into my arms. The machine’s red and yellow rectangular eyes illuminate me when I sleep. A circular patch on my chest makes a green line on my machine’s square black face bounce up and down. The machine loves me; it buzzes, and I can hear it say, “I love you.” My mom loves me too. She sleeps in a chair next to me. She has to leave every once and a while to be a doctor, but she comes back. My mom doesn’t need to worry; the machine watches me.

I’m sitting in my bed; I’m four. My walls are covered with brightly colored triangles, circles, squares, and dinosaurs. I am at Lutheran hospital in downtown Des Moines. The window to my room is small, and the lights above me hurt my eyes. At night, I watch the shadows creep in and dance on my chest. Only my machine protects me from the dark.

It hurts to go to the bathroom. My mom lifts me from my bed by grabbing me under the armpits. She holds my hand and helps me walk across a mile of empty white, slick, cold, tile floor to get to the toilet. I know how to use the bathroom by myself, but I cannot carry my machine, so a nurse wheels it behind us. When I sit on the cold metal toilet my right arm begins to hurt. Pain shoots down my arm. The machine is telling me not to go much farther, not to leave or else it can’t watch me. If it doesn’t stay attached to me the shadows will get into me.

It is tugging me closer to it. I go to the bathroom fast. When I stand up the pain goes away. I make the slow journey back to my bed, back to my safe zone.

The pneumonia floats to the outer halves of my lungs. It feels like a boulder is being pushed off of my chest and my breathing gets easier. I know that it will slowly leave my body; I trust that my machine will rid me of the shadows. The doctor takes a round, cold black tube and places it on my ribs to hear into my chest. He takes pictures of my bare body in a special room to see into my future. He enters everyday to hear me breathe. As the months go by, he leaves the room each day with a widening grin. The shadows begin to draw back out the window and my machine's eyes grow brighter.

When my mom drives me home, she forgets to bring my machine with us. It stays alone in the hospital room. I crouch down in the back seat of the car, my hands clutching the top of the back headrest. I peer out the back window with only my eyes above the seat. "Your brothers are going to be so glad to see you, Joseph." She never says anything about why she leaves my machine behind. I watch the shadow follow us out of the hospital, down the road, and then into my home. It creeps into my room, onto my chest, and slides down my throat as I sleep.