

The Break Up

Miss Peachay...Miss Peachay!" Urgent knocking at my door woke me from my fitful slumber. I peeked out of the door to see a thin teenage girl standing there. "Miss Peachay, a baby is sick."

"Tiljek's baby?" I asked, as we arrived at the block building with low windows. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach when I knew it was him. Tiljek had lost several children in infancy. She was simple, slightly empty-eyed, and Maxson cried wherever his mother went. This was her fourth baby; none of the others had lived.

A kerosene lantern lit the bare room with pandanus sleeping mats on the floor. Tiljek was holding Maxson on her lap. I held my hands out, and she placed him in them. He was hot to the touch, had a red tint to his sweaty skin, and I could hear him wheezing. He was exhibiting all the signs of pneumonia.

I pulled out my little cheat sheet of medical terms "*Ikkijelok?*" I asked. "Is he having trouble breathing?" Tiljek didn't answer, just staring at me blankly.

"Aet," Karla said. "Yes."

"Ewi toon?" I asked. "How long?"

"Ruo raan," she said.

"Two days?!" I exclaimed. I knew that letting pneumonia go untreated in an infant could have devastating consequences.

I shuffled through my bag until I found the inhaler and spacer. I gave Maxson an albuterol treatment to widen his airways and relieve his labored breathing. Unfortunately, the raspy wheezing continued.

I found the liquid acetaminophen and an eyedropper and gave Maxson a dose, then looked back at my medical term sheet.

"Emmoj?" I asked. "Has he vomited?" Tiljek stared at me blankly. Her husband, who had been sitting in the shadows, moved forward and nodded.

"Ewi toon? How long?" I asked.

"Jilu raan," he said. "Um. Tree days?"

I felt sick. Vomiting and diarrhea would add dehydration to list of challenges I'd need to combat for Maxson to recover.

"Tiljek," I said. "*Kōkaajiriri.*" I handed Maxson back to her, gesticulating that she should nurse him.

"*Ejjelok,*" the father said, shaking his head.

"She doesn't have milk?" I asked, confused. The baby was only four months old.

"What are you feeding him, then?" I asked, shrugging my shoulders in confusion.

He searched in the shadows and came up with a baby bottle and a can of evaporated milk. Not the best choice, I knew, but better than nothing.

Maxson didn't seem to have much desire to drink; that was not a good sign. The whole time, Tiljek sat blankly, no expression on her face. She didn't reach for her baby or come close to me to see how he was doing.

I rewrapped Maxson in his blanket and leaned against the wall of the house, patting him on the back, and fell asleep with the hot little body on my lap.

When I woke up an hour or two later to the faint light of morning, something didn't seem right. Maxson wasn't on my lap anymore. I looked around to see that he was on a mat in front of Tiljek.

"How is he?" I asked, crawling over to place my hand on him. His skin wasn't hot anymore, and I felt a moment of relief until I realized he wasn't breathing.

"*Ewi toon?* How long?" I cried out, grabbing my stethoscope and listening for the heartbeat that wasn't there.

"*Juon awa,*" Tiljek said blandly.

An hour. It was too late to do anything for him. Maxson was gone.

I stumbled from the house and walked to the lagoon, where I sat on the sand and stared out over the water.

Compartmentalization. It's a talent a nurse must develop so that he or she won't be crushed by the constant barrage of sickness and death one deals with in the health care field. Somehow the clinical, sanitized nature of a hospital or clinic enables compartmentalizing. A *hospital* is where death happens. Not a little house on a beautiful tropical island. Not when you've done your best. Not when it's a mother's fourth baby and none of them have lived.

I buried my face in my hands and sobbed, and then I heard the sound that broke my heart.

"Carlie? Are you okay?"

He was barefoot on the beach, wearing that damn sarong and a tee shirt, looking muscular and innocent and adorable. I wanted to rush into his arms. I wanted him to hold me. I knew that was the one thing that would make this ache in my chest go away. But instead, I lied.

"I'll be okay. It's just... Tiljek's baby just died." Campbell moved closer. "We can't be alone together anymore," I said to him. "If they're gossiping about us, we need to be more careful."

"What if I don't care what they say?" he asked. His jaw clenched, but his eyes were filled with compassion.

"You *should*. If you lose your reputation among the locals, they won't trust you to teach their kids."

He stepped forward again.

"It's more than just your reputation. *You can't be here,*" I said, standing up.

"But you *need* me, hen," he said gently, reaching his hand out to my cheek and swiping the tears from beneath my eye with his thumb. He moved toward me as if to take me in his arms.

I stepped away from him. "I *can't* need you, Campbell," I shook my head as my chin quivered. "I'm engaged to Eric. I've taken advantage of your kindness and I've allowed my loneliness to fool myself into thinking this was okay. I've used my distance from Eric to justify this." I motioned back and forth between us. "But even if we're not having sex, this is *cheating*."

He was looking at me with such compassionate affection that I wanted to throw myself at him. I wanted him so badly I needed him to *hate* me.

"You're such a nice kid, Campbell," I said. He stiffened and his eyes narrowed. "And I appreciate your friendship. But I've let my isolation in this place create a false sense of intimacy. If we were in the states, we wouldn't be friends. You would never have noticed me, and I'm *certain* I wouldn't have noticed you."

Yet another lie; with his bright hair and broad shoulders, Campbell was certain to draw attention wherever he went.

"I am here to focus on service to others, not some silly flirtation with a kid I could have babysat growing up." I could see that my words were finally working. Campbell's jaw tightened, his eyes filled with a fiery intensity that rivaled any strength of desire or affection I'd seen there before.

"I've already allowed myself to ignore the locals and shirk my responsibilities. If I had been doing home visits, I would have known Maxson was sick and he wouldn't have died."

I covered my eyes with my hand, feeling Campbell's continued closeness even though I'd tried to push him away. "Please go away, Campbell. I'm not strong enough right now to fight with you."

"Okay, *Ri-pälle*, I'm going." The silence of bare feet on sand meant that when I finally opened my eyes, he had disappeared like a ghost.

There's no delaying a funeral in a tropical climate. Without a morgue or refrigeration, the decomposition process begins immediately. Word traveled quickly that in the evening, there would be a funeral. The sun was low in the sky when I put my sandals on and walked to Tiljek's house. I had a horrendous headache and felt sad and sick from crying.

A crowd of people were scattered around Tiljek's yard sitting on woven pandanus mats. A table held an abundance of food—rice, fish, barbecued chicken, Spam, roasted breadfruit, bananas, and papaya.

I waited my turn to go inside and then sat next to Tiljek, her eyes still empty, fanning little Maxson to keep the flies away. A white sheet over him covered his mouth. I was cried out and weary, but I could sit and be sad with her, so I did that, watching Maxson's wispy black hair lifting in the breeze as she fanned him.

When I went outside, I filled my plate, then looking around the yard saw Graham, Ewan, and Campbell sitting on a mat on one side of the pebble-strewn yard. Instead I turned and found Anni.

"You not sit with Meester Mack?" asked Anni as I sat down next to her on the pandanus mat.

"No," I said. "*Ej jab konaan.*"

"He doesn't want you?" she asked. I met his eyes across the yard. That obviously wasn't true. He was looking at me and didn't look away when I met his gaze; we stared sadly at each other until I finally looked down.

"No, I don't want *him*," I said over the lump in my throat. "How do you say that?"

"EE-jab, not eh-jab," said Anni. "But Miss Peachay," she shook her head, looking at me critically. "*Enana riab*. Is bad to lie."