

Excerpt from *A Noble Paradise* by James Crawford

David Nobile looked at his watch again. 10:18 a.m. He let his arm fall to his lap and adjusted himself on the soft leather sofa. His gaze wandered up to the colorful cartoon-like mural painted on the wall across from him where happy children and plush toy animals marched in a merry parade.

*Happy children. Who wants to look at a scene like that in a place like this? Happy children, carefree, playful, and healthy. Unlike my...* As his gaze wandered over the bright faces he felt his throat tighten and his eyes began to tear.

*I can't do this. Not now. Not here. If I start that now I won't be able to make it through the day. I'll need all my strength and wits soon enough. Why does everything take so long in a hospital?*

David sighed and turned his head to the right, letting his eyes wander over a mural on that wall. Here played more happy, cartoon-like children, riding in a sailboat, catching butterflies, playing a variety of sports. He quickly shut his eyes in an attempt to block out the images, his chest surging with grief.

*I've got to get a grip on myself. Find another focus. They'll be here soon.*

He opened his eyes and stared at the woman sitting on the couch on the far side of the room. An elegant woman, well-dressed in a gray business suit and skirt, her long black hair spread out over one shoulder. Although she was an attractive woman, she seemed less so now as she slept uncomfortably in a sitting position, her cheek resting on her fist, her mouth open. He watched her sag slowly down, catching herself and smacking her lips to swallow the accumulation of saliva.

As David watched her, a seething black hatred began to boil up in him, momentarily pushing away the grief. She was the author of all his misery. *I can't remember the last time I felt any love for you. What have you become, you stupid, manipulative, treacherous, horrible bitch?*

She stirred again as if she'd heard his thoughts. He knew there was no time for such angst, but at least it kept the tears at bay.

A movement to his left caught his eye. He turned his head and saw the doctor enter the room, his face grave.

*But his face is always grave. Look at what he does for a living. That's no news.*

Behind the doctor came the head nurse dressed in floral scrubs. She looked at David with an expression of true sympathy.

*Her expression means neither good nor bad news, just compassion.*

After the nurse came the social worker, a young woman new at her job. She seemed to be trying to measure how much emotion she should express when there's just another formality of paperwork to be filled out. She held a clipboard to her chest and forced a weak smile at David.

*So far so good. No news is good news.*

Another man followed wearing a dark suit and carrying a hat and a Bible.

*Clergy.*

And then David knew, as sure as if it had been announced over the PA system. The minister looked at David with kindness and pity and David felt his heart sink.

The happy children were beckoning.