

## GESUNDHEIT, SAID THE GRIM REAPER

Written By Hannah Louise Shearer

I can't breathe. I'm miserable. I've got a cold and I'm sure I'm going to die from it.

I slap myself – that's a sacrilege, so many people are *really* hurting, suffering pain or loss, going through some kind of anguish, or on the verge of death. Shame on you and besides – Don't Tempt God.

Despite that caveat, I lie miserable in my bed, sheets askew, surrounded by 35 magazines, two mysteries, a steaming hot humidifier (fuck those people who say you're supposed to use a cold air humidifier for a cold, what do they know, they can breathe), herbs, Kleenex, a trash basket, and the TV. It's 3 A.M. and I can't breathe. My cats are thrilled I'm up during their hunting time. Never mind it's my toes they're hunting.

I'm alone and I know I'm doomed. This is it. Someone's going to break in and burglarize the place. They'll tie me up, gag me, and I'll suffocate, not even able to breathe through my mouth. Panic overwhelms me. I can't get through the fear by telling myself to just breathe, breathe deeply, because I can't fucking breathe. I move the phone closer to the bed, making sure I can punch 911 by touch, turn on the overhead light, and put my face on the steamer. Fuck those instructions that say don't ever put your face in the steam for all kinds of dire reasons, how else am I supposed to clear my head?

Wait! A tiny little space zig zags through my left nostril. A stream of air actually pushes its way through and gets to my brain.

I try to hold onto that, turn out the light, put the TV on low because it calms the 'I'm sure the burglar is just outside' willies. I turn on my side on my four elevated pillows. If I can just keep that little air stream going I might be able to fall asleep before I die of panic and mucous.

I fall into that strange twilight space between waking and sleeping, that zone of floating where you couldn't move even if someone was fiddling with the front door lock. The images float through my wet brain, along with the blame. The trip back from D.C., that's when I was ambushed. Running across the Philadelphia airport with six minutes to spare? Thousands of people milling around, where are they all going on a Sunday night? No, it was the plane, it had to be the plane, a full miserable flight, people coughing and hacking. Yeah, I'm sure it was the recirculating air on that flying coffin.

So why am I trying to figure out *where* I got sick, anyway? Like it matters. Still can't move, still can't breathe. The sliver of a passage in my nose is swelling again.

Maybe I'm lying here miserable because I didn't offer to change places with the poor 6'2" guy stuffed into the middle seat next to me. Maybe it was the crying baby the

distraught mother walked back and forth past me for four hours. Whatever, this search for the culprit doesn't matter. I still can't breathe.

I'm tempted to get up and find some nose spray, I don't care if it expired ten years ago. Can't. Won't. Refuse to give in. It used to be I'd go through a whole bottle of Isophrin in two days. It'd clear my passages for about 20 minutes, then I'd get blocked again and out came those drops. That was before the doctor informed me I'd destroy my sinuses with that shit. And that doesn't even take into account the rebound effect, he said, which makes the cold last longer and ruins the delicate nasal passages and makes them even more swollen. *Rebound* effect? Oh God, dummy, don't you read the directions about using this stuff only three times a day? Well, yeah, but that doesn't apply to *me*. I can't breathe!

But the word addiction gets my attention. I drop Isophrin like it was spelled lye, cold turkey, just like I did with cigarettes. And antibiotics, unless I'm about to be pronounced.

As I get older, my contemporaries head toward an endlessly medicated state. I wave at them and go the other way. I'm called a Luddite, because I don't trust the pharmaceutical companies, the doctors, the advertising agencies, the FDA, you name it.

5 A.M., my chest gurgles while I still float above my bed, *Murder She Wrote* droning on in its 700<sup>th</sup> rerun as comforting background. I figure out where some of my resistance comes from. It's because of this science fiction book my brother Phillip gave me when I was about ten. *The Prodigal Sun*. In it, the rich, greedy, ruling class of society was injected with an improperly tested antidote to a dangerous virus. Of course it turned out those people were the ones who couldn't be saved when the prodigal son returned to fix the Earth's sick sun. Terribly written book, but never mind, the theory stuck – I rarely take medicine and I rarely get sick.

So smug, am I. Yeah, mostly because of amazing Dr. Yang and his magic natural Chinese herbs. For the last eighteen years he's cured me of a multitude of minor ailments. I haven't had a bad cold or flu since I met him. Until now.

This time I had the herbs in the house, didn't even have to drive to Alhambra. At the first suspicion all is not in balance in my life, the twinge of tension behind my eyes, the parched throat, the vagueness of my mind, I pop the little green and yellow pills, serene in the knowledge that everyone else might suffer through the commonness of the cold virus, but not me. I'm stronger, smarter, and I take herbs and never get as sick as anyone else.

Except I make some alien noise so loud it jolts me out of my altered state, and I can't breathe and the cats are using me as a launching pad and it's too light outside to go to sleep, and my head feels like a watermelon with seeds, and I'm fucking miserable. I jump out of bed and fix the humidifier which is out of water and probably will burn down the condo if I don't unplug it.

I feed the cats and clean the cat box and make some tea, and then I realize that sometime during my labored almost-sleep, I must've lived through the crisis. The sun is out, the cats are purring, I'm up so early the paper wasn't stolen – and I'm not entirely clogged. I may not die of my cold. This time.

I figure by the end of the week, when my voice is pleasantly husky instead of rasping and my nose is functional instead of traumatized, I'll be almost happy again.

In two weeks, I'll forget I was sick. In three, I'll be invincible again.

Until next time.