

Sketch

Volume 68, Number 2

2004

Article 22

Consent to Death

Sara Horstmann*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2004 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Consent to Death

Sara Horstmann

"Hey there, Beautiful." He stood in the doorway, the light from the hallway silhouetting his thin body. His shoulders were relaxed and his arms hung down by his sides. He smiled at her like an old Hollywood heartthrob, Carey Grant or James Dean, with his head tilted at an angle and only one side of his mouth turned up. The smile was so subtle, but she saw it immediately. She loved his smile. She memorized it months ago.

"Hey, you," she said as he walked into the room. "I was wondering where you were." He sat down in front of her on the bed. She heard the familiar sound of freshly starched bed linens crunching underneath his weight. He settled into a half pretzel, his right leg dangling off the side of the bed.

Still smiling, he said, "I just heard the good news from the nurses. Congratulations, Jules." She wasn't surprised by Sam's lack of exuberant words or gestures.

"Pretty incredible, huh? I'm not sure I really believe it." She opened her eyes as wide as possible, showing Sam her bewilderment. She ran her hand over her scalp, bald from chemo, and felt the new growth of brown hair.

Sam stared down into his lap. "It's big news. Hearing you've finally licked this thing and are going home tomorrow... it's a lot to think about all at once."

Julia glanced about the simple square room, the room that had grown to be so familiar. Heavy vertical blinds allowed only slits of sunlight to filter into the room, making the plain beige walls look striped. Deflated "Get Well Soon" balloons littered the floor around her dresser, their ribbon tails trailing up to their sand weights resting on top. On the nightstand stood picture frames with dated photographs of family and friends inside. Crayon and marker drawings made by some of the children on the floor covered the wall opposite her bed. Phrases of inspiration were written above the heads of smiling stick figures. Phrases like: "Be strong, it only hurts for a little while;" "At least you don't have to worry about bad hair days any more;" and her personal favorite, "We're glad to have you here, even though we're really not."

Julia looked back at Sam. He was caressing a fresh bruise on his inner elbow. She folded her arms across her chest and hunched forward. "It's funny, you know," she tried to force herself to laugh.

“All I think about is going home. But now that I finally can, I’m not sure I want to.” She shrugged her shoulders and turned her head to the side.

“I’m not so sure I want you to go, either.” Sam rolled down his sleeve and began to toy with the hem of his pajama pants, pulling one thread out at a time.

Julia reached over and selected a frame from the cluster on her nightstand. Inside was a group of girls dressed in Halloween costumes. She studied her old self: rosy skin, thick chocolate brown hair, a body she now regretted ever wishing was thinner. The girl inside the frame was a distant memory, the complete opposite from the girl she now saw every day in the mirror. Her skin had turned yellow and bruised; dark circles constantly lingered under her eyes. Barely enough fat was left in her body to cover her pointy bones. If she weighed over 100 pounds, it was considered a good day. Not to mention her hair. She couldn’t even remember what it felt like to run her fingers through those long strands, to feel beautiful, to feel normal. She felt like a shaved, sickly cat, bare and exposed. Julia knew she wouldn’t fit into that picture anymore. That is, not unless she could convince her friends that Cancer Girl was the costume she was going for.

“I don’t even know these people anymore,” Julia confessed. Sam abandoned the hem of his pants and looked at the picture. She traced her fingers across the surface of the glass. Lifting her head, she met Sam’s stare. He remained speechless, chewing softly on the inside of his lower lip. “How can I possibly leave tomorrow and risk losing you the same way I lost them?”

Julia and Sam had formed an inseparable relationship over the past eight months on the pediatric oncology floor. Sam had already been there for two years, battling a very rare form of liver cancer, when Julia arrived. It was inevitable they would bond over the two main things they had in common: age and chemotherapy. Together they celebrated their eighteenth birthdays only a few weeks apart, making them the oldest on the floor by almost five years. Although technically they were too old for pediatrics, the hospital staff saw no reason for moving or separating them.

So they stayed together, and with the other children, they endured chemo, the so-called cure that just happened to destroy them at the same time. At first, Sam’s appearance frightened Julia: his emaciated body, the permanent catheter in his chest. It didn’t take long before she understood, before she literally felt his pain.

Julia was grateful for Sam, to have someone by her side who suffered the same way. With each other they felt safe and protected. He wasn't disgusted when clumps of hair fell out of her head, or when he held her wrenching body over the toilet. Julia never once turned away from the unending track of bruises up Sam's arms or his sharp ribs and defined shoulder bones. On a regular basis, they shared a bed together at night, comforting each other, distributing the pain equally between them. They made each other's cancers, at the very least, bearable.

Sam finally replied, "It's kind of weird, but I guess after all this time, I just assumed we'd always be here together." Tears gathered in Julia's eyes. Her chin crinkled. She watched Sam study the light striped walls.

"I know. Me too," Julia said, wiping the moisture from under her eyes. She grasped his hands. "Look, I promise I'll be here for you. Whenever you need me, I'll be here."

He looked down at their joined hands and softly shook his head back and forth. "It just won't be the same."

They sat together in the stale quiet room.

"Hey, Sam, let's go out tonight, okay?" Julia suggested, interrupting the silence. "One last rendezvous before I leave?" She waited uneasily for his reply.

"Yeah, sure, I'd like that," Sam replied with a half grin. Julia saw his eyes nervously move around the room. Then he closed them tightly, clenched his teeth, and drew in a deep breath, flooding his lungs. "Um, except there's something I have to do first. Something I promised I'd do tonight." He stared into her eyes. "I'll be back in a little bit." He eased off the bed and disappeared before Julia could say a word.

When Sam finally returned to her room, he walked in silently and slowly. Julia removed a colored drawing from the wall and pulled the tape off the back of it.

"Packing already?"

Startled, Julia whipped around, one hand pressed to her heart, the other held her forehead. "Oh my God, you scared me! Where've you been?" she exclaimed, poking his bony shoulder. She pulled the last piece of tape off the drawing and laid it on the pile with the others.

"Oh, well, I told Danny I'd play a game of speed with him."

"A game of speed? You've been gone for over an hour."

"Oh, you know, I stopped to talk to a few people along the way."

Julia walked over to the dresser and opened the top drawer. She pulled out a blue bandana, a birthday gift from Sam, and wrapped it around her head. "Well, anyway, can we go now?"

Sam looked down at the floor and nodded his head. "Yeah, we can both go now."

They left Julia's room and stared down the long hallway. Morning, noon, and night, the bright fluorescent lights were always the same intensity. They stopped for a minute to chat with the familiar faces at the nurses' desk. More than just nurses and doctors, the entire pediatric oncology staff was part of their extended family. They all recognized Julia and Sam's relationship. Never once did anyone object when the two of them broke rules to spend time together. In fact, they more or less encouraged it, approving of anything that raised the dreary spirits of their patients. As Julia and Sam left the desk, they overheard one of them ask, "Is it wrong to not want her to leave?"

They held hands and walked slowly down the hallway, not in any sort of hurry. Every door they passed was identical, except for the room number that appeared beside it and the patient's name below that. If a door was open, they popped their heads in to say hello to the child inside before continuing on their journey. With each step she took, Julia felt the cold, hard linoleum floor through the soles of her slippers. When they reached the elevators, Sam leaned over to her and asked, "So, what do you say we hit the cafeteria for our big date?"

"Actually, I was thinking I'd like to see the new babies one last time."

The nursery was only one of the places Julia and Sam ventured to on evenings when they felt strong enough for the walk. The term "going out" didn't mean going out of the hospital, but more or less, going somewhere else in the hospital. Some nights, their walks led them to no place in particular. They were simply out to discover a new hallway or stairwell they had never visited before. Other nights, though, they had a definite destination in mind. It was a tradition to visit the newest arrivals in the nursery. They would stand at the window, hold each other like proud new parents, and ogle at the tiny babies. They made up names for each one, wondering if they would ever get to do it for a baby of their own. On quieter evenings, they went to the Intensive Care Unit

and walked gravely past the doors, knowing that behind each one lay a person being kept alive with plastic and electricity. They made up heartbreaking stories about each of them. Stories about how they got there, about their suffering families, about whether or not they would ever leave that room alive. Then they would return to their rooms and wonder if other patients in the hospital ever visited their wing, if others ever made up stories about them, about the children fighting a war with cancer.

They stepped off the elevator and headed down the hall toward the nursery. As they got closer to the window, murals began to appear on the walls, colorful pictures of clouds and flowers, butterflies and rabbits. The baby floor even smelled better to Julia. But the lights above them and the tile floor below them were very much the same. At the window, they squeezed in between an exhausted but cuddling young couple and an older gentleman with a video camera. Julia and Sam imitated the delighted duo, wrapping their arms around each other. Right away they began their usual activity of christening the babies.

"Oh, look at that one in the back! Oh, he is too cute. I think he's a George, or maybe....no, no....he's definitely a George. Just look at that round, pudgy face." Julia held her finger up to the window and pointed to George. She cooed at him with her lips pursed out in an exaggerated kissing fashion.

Ignoring Julia, Sam counted the number of newborns. Chuckling, he leaned towards her ear and loudly whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "It must have been an exceptionally busy week nine months ago."

"Well, it is the end of September. You do the math." Unable to control their laughter, they received glares from the happy couple on their left and the grandpa on their right.

"Just think Sam...someday, one of them could be ours. How do you feel about the name George?" Julia said with a giggle. She pressed her palm against the glass, staring longingly through the window. Sam dropped his arm from her shoulder and backed away, hanging his head. She turned around with a smile. "Sam? What's wrong? You don't like the name George?"

"Julia, I have to tell you something," he whispered, hoping the other observers would not hear.

Her smile faded and she stepped closer to him, her eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

He grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the window

and the annoyed strangers. He led her farther down the hall to a door at the very end marked "Family Room." Inside the burgundy walls were dimly lit by a small table lamp in the corner. Four waiting room chairs lined the walls in an L-shape with a matching ottoman in the middle. Sam sat Julia down on one of the chairs, then moved the ottoman in front of her and took a seat.

"What's going on?" she asked.

He took several long, deep breaths. "I lied to you today about where I was."

"You didn't play cards?" Julia was confused and nervous.

"No...well yes, I didn't play cards, but it's more than that." Through the open door they watched as a herd of people rushed down the hallway, carrying balloons and cameras. Like a swarm of hungry bees, they flew at the window, forcing the others out of the way. Sam got up and closed the heavy door. The second it shut, Julia felt they were enclosed in a sound booth. Sam returned to his seat and grabbed hold of her hands.

"I should have told you earlier where I was all day." He drew in more air before he continued. "I was with my parents. We had a meeting with the doctors, because I got test results back today, too. Except...mine weren't nearly as good as yours." Tears began to gather again along Julia's lower lashes, but she flared her nose to try to stop it. "Jules, my cancer spread. They found spots in my lungs."

Julia's heart raced. She breathed in spurts. From eight months on the oncology floor, she knew it meant Sam's chemo had stopping working. She lowered her head and pushed her eyebrows together, creating tiny folds on her forehead. Sam rubbed his thumbs back and forth against the back of her hands, never once taking his eyes off her.

"What did they decide to do?" she asked

"*They* didn't decide anything. This time it was my choice."

Julia lifted her head. "Alright, well what are you going to do?"

Sam licked his lips and swallowed hard. "I didn't know at first. I told them I needed some time to think about it. Then, I found out you were leaving." He paused for a moment, trying to read her face. "Jules, I don't want any more surgeries or treatments. I went back and told them I want to go home."

"What?!" Julia sprang to her feet, her arms flung out to the sides. She paced about the tiny room. "No, you can't do that. You

just can't do that." She shook her head back and forth in disbelief.

Sam stood and stopped her by the shoulders. "Jules, c'mon, listen to me." He turned her around and held her in front of him.

"No, I don't want to listen. You can't leave."

"Why?"

"I think you know why." She glared at him and shoved his arms away. Pushing past him, she walked back toward her seat. Sam remained still, unsure of what to do or say. Julia placed her hands on her hips. "You've come this far, how can you all of a sudden give up?"

Sam turned around and stared at her back. "I thought you of all people would understand."

Julia spun to look at him. They stood facing each other like two fighters in a western movie about to draw their guns. "Understand? How am I supposed to understand that you want to die?"

Sam motioned to her, his arms extended, but she stepped back from his reach. He explained, "You're supposed to understand that I'm tired, that I'm sick of fighting this."

A trail of tears ran down her cheek. She stuck the tip of her tongue out to grab a salty drop that had gathered at the corner of her mouth. She crossed her arms in front of her chest. Then Julia closed her eyes, flared her nostrils, and pressed her lips together, preparing herself for what she was about to say. "I won't let you use my leaving as an excuse to die."

"Excuse? Jules, I don't need an excuse. I'm already dying."

She slipped back into her seat and hid her face in her hands. Sam sat in front of her once again and lightly grabbed hold of her forearms, pulling her hands away from her face.

He looked in her eyes and told her plainly, "It's not that I want to die. There just isn't a reason for me to stay anymore."

"Yes, there is. There're still things they can do, things they can try. And I told you before that I'll come back here for you, every day if I have to."

"But, I don't want that," Sam protested. Julia stared at him bewildered. "You're going home to start over and get past being sick and living in the hospital. You can't do that if you're running back here all the time to hold my hand."

"Yes, I can, and I want to."

"No, Jules, it's not right." He shook his head.

"And you leaving the hospital is?" She was losing the argu-

ment.

"We both know I'm leaving here one way or the other. How and when I leave may be the last decisions about my life that I get to make."

Tears emerged from Julia's closed eyes and she dropped her head. "I'm losing you after all." Her chin quivered with a frown.

"Not exactly," he lifted her head. "Before you left your friends behind, tomorrow I'm going with you."

Julia trembled with sobs. She wanted to scream and shout in anger and protest, but Sam wrapped his long arms around her and held her too tight for any more objections. Time slipped away to the sound of her tears. Finally, she was too weak even to cry, and Sam let go. He stood up and helped Julia to her feet. She stared at him with pleading eyes, but he only smiled and nodded his head. Releasing one last defeated breath, she pushed her lips together and nodded back to him in agreement.

Without a sound, Julia and Sam made their way back down the hallway toward the elevators. They held each other, embracing the end of their nighttime excursions. As they passed by the vacant nursery window, Julia stole one final glance at the babies. She smiled at the sight of little George in his baby blue hat and matching booties. There in the back of all the babies, he flailed his arms and legs, punching his tiny fist into the air for attention. George squirmed like a beetle on its back, fighting to sit up, to stand up, to get up.