



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

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Year 2011

Article 3

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1-1-2011

## Release

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Cochran, Tina (2011) "Release," *The Mercury*: Year 2011, Article 3.  
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## Release

### **Keywords**

creative writing, fiction

### **Author Bio**

Tina Cochran is a fairly active writer. Her focus has been primarily on the novel and she has several underway, but within the past two or three years, she has begun to appreciate the value and structure of the short story. Flash fiction is a personal favorite. She plans to finish two of her novels this year and hopes to see both of them published one day.

# RELEASE

TINA COCHRAN

SpaghettiOs taste like vomit. She battled with the spoon that threatened the very life of her taste buds. She choked on the taste, but her throat opened to the invasion and SpaghettiOs rushed through her esophagus. The warm substance set off small convulsions throughout her left side as the moving internal heat forced her to realize how cold her skin felt.

"It's good, isn't it, Alice?"

The attending RN flashed a postcard smile as she wiped Alice's mouth. Her teeth looked like they'd been scrubbed with alcohol and stuck out between over-glossed lips. It was the same smile she gave to every other resident on the block.

*It tastes disgusting.*

"It's so good to see you so lively today, Alice. This is your favorite meal, right? My kids love this type of food."

*Child services should be knocking at your door for feeding those innocent things such trash.*

"That's right—I had a feeling this would make today a good day, Alice. You've been lonely lately. Your daughter hasn't made it in a little while. I know she's only nineteen, but I'm sure you miss her when she can't get in."

*Shirley was here two days ago. I don't need her to show up every single day... and stop saying my name every time you speak. I'm only forty-nine. I've got a ways to go before I'm senile.*

A knock at the door interrupted them. One of the younger women who worked in the section stepped a foot into the room. "Pam, can I steal you away for a minute? I need help and Kate is helping John. Good morning, Ms. Alice."

*Mrs., and when did I tell you you were allowed to speak in such a familiar way, addressing a stranger by their first name?*

Looking at the girl, Alice felt badly about berating her. The girl was still naïve. Her smile was still genuine. She was new.

"Sure thing." Pam jumped up from her chair in a way that declared ex-high school cheerleader. "Alright, Alice. I'll be back in no time. I'm just going to step out with Karri. You don't go anywhere, all right?" She was out the door before she finished. They left the door open; they always did. She turned to twirl her fingers at Alice before she was out of sight.

*I'm partially paralyzed and chained to more machinery than a science experiment. Where am I going to go?*

Alice was left alone with nothing to do. Pam had forgotten to switch on the radio before she left. The television remote was inches from her bed

side tantalizing her. She remembered her book had been moved to the other side of the room when Pam was searching for a place to put down the food tray.

She looked around at the state-of-the-art living quarters. The bed could fold up into a chair, like it was now; there were tracks in the ceiling complete with a sling chair that could be used to carry her from bed to bathroom. It was crisp, clean, and cold. Pam had forgotten to open the curtains again. She always did. It was like the woman thought Alice would implode if the smallest amount of sunlight touched her skin.

The beeping of the heart rate monitor tore through the silence.

*Will you shut up?*

She sorted through the wires attaching her to different machines with her good arm, her left. She found one that when she tugged gently she could see a reaction on the heart rate monitor. She followed its trail until she found the connection point on her skin. She had been born a righty but her left hand nimbly disconnected the cords. It had gotten a lot of practice in the year she'd been there.

The heart rate monitor screamed.

Quick, efficient steps made their way down the hall from the nurses' station. Pam entered with her business face on but a look of disappointment flashed when she entered the room. The newest members of the staff tentatively peeked past the door frame.

"Alice, what are you doing? Did you take these off?" She was close enough that she took the wires into her hand and held them up.

*Yup, and I'll do it again. That idiotic beeping is the worst form of torture.*

Pam's eyes creased along her brow. "You need this."

*All it does is tell you I'm alive, and if you can't tell that yourself, you should go back to nursing school. It doesn't actually keep me alive. It just beeps.*

Alice tried to give her a challenging look, but only one eye scrunched up, giving her face a tilted look. Movement caught her attention. A crowd had gathered at the door. The new staff still peeked around each other, but the other residents were openly peering into the room. One had even passed through the doorway. They were so much older than she was. Pam caught Alice's attention again as she readjusted the wires and fiddled with the monitor.

"This helps us take better care of you Alice. You shouldn't take it off again. Do you understand?"

Within the next week, Alice had removed the cords at least twice a day every day and by the end of the week, she'd begun to investigate the value of keeping the other wires pinned to her flesh.

It had become a type of game, really. Removing the cords when they least expected, forcing them to stay on alert at all times. The time it took them to show up was slowly becoming longer and longer as they anticipated her actions. They'd brought the doctor in once to try to explain why she needed to stop removing the equipment. She'd unplugged the heart rate monitor five

minutes after he left.

Her daughter showed up the next day.

"Pam is really worried about you. She told me you keep unhooking the monitors?" She had pulled over a chair and sat in it backwards, her chin resting on the tall backing. Alice looked at her sadly. She was so young, just nineteen. Alice had married late, had children late, and now she was dying early. Shirley's tired eyes stared openly at her, searching for something.

"Are you trying to commit suicide?"

The question sent a jolt through her. Suicide? She'd never even thought about it. She raised her good hand and waved her hand as emphatically as she could.

*I'm not ready to die just yet.*

"I'm worried about you. You stress yourself out too much. It's why you had a stroke at forty-eight."

*You're worried that the same will happen to you.*

Alice didn't blame her but frustration had been growing over the past few months. Shirley reached into her bag and pulled out the notepad that was their final connection. She put a pen in Alice's hand and put the pad on the bed under her hand. The nurses had seen it done, but Alice refused to talk to anyone else in this manner. It belonged solely to Shirley.

"Tell me what's changed. You've been here for a year and you never tried anything like this before."

"I'm just frustrated, sweetling." The letters were large and awkward. "I never get to see outside because the blinds are always shut and I can't even move that far to open them."

"I know you're used to jumping back up and doing everything at once, but the doctors said the healing process would be slow. You've gained some feeling back. Remember the first day they let you eat food again instead of eating through the IV? You were so happy that day." Brown eyes pleaded with her to reason.

"Like a toddler who has finally used the bathroom on her own. That feeling was happiness for the first bite. Then I found out they would feed me every meal. It was infuriating." It took her much longer to write it out, but she refused to cut anything out.

"Everyone here knows you're not a baby, Mom." She pressed her forehead against the back of the chair so that the words came out muffled and ended with a higher pitch.

"I'm just an invalid."

"That is the truth!" The words slipped and Alice could see the instant regret and exasperation on her hot-tempered daughter's face.

The words hit like a slap and Alice let the pen fall to the pad. Alice knew Shirley could sense the change in her. They had so much in common. They'd always been close. Now they were torn apart on the days Shirley forgot the legal pad.

"I'm sorry." When Alice made no move to respond she continued. "I'll come to visit again next Saturday, ok? Please stop unplugging the monitors?" She kissed Alice on her bad cheek, bundled up her things, and left.

Later that night, Alice started playing with the wires again. She didn't unhook anything this time. It felt like she would be betraying Shirley if she ignored her request on the same day it had been made. Over the week, she had figured out which cords set off what alarms. She felt immense pleasure at disconnecting the oxygen tube and breathing on her own. It was a little more difficult, but she could do it. She had figured out how to place the mask so that the pumped oxygen never entered her nostrils, but when the nurses passed by the door they couldn't tell anything was off.

Alice repositioned the tubes. Of all the cords and tubes she was connected to, for some reason the oxygen mask felt the most intrusive. She hated the thing.

That evening everything accumulated to an intoxicating weight. Pam had scolded her after Shirley left and the doctor had come in to send her on a guilt trip about worrying her daughter.

The damn curtains were closed again. Since it was past bedtime, the door was shut, the only redeeming fact for the day.

Her body convulsed upward and for one split moment she could feel both her legs, move both her arms and actually turn her head. Her eyes blinked on and off—until she hit the mattress again and all that existed was her mind. She tried to lift her good hand. Nothing moved. She tried to look down but her gaze was glued to the beeping monitor beside her bed. She couldn't even blink.

Her panic would have had her yelling for help except that her lungs had calcified. No air passed her lips and she knew the oxygen mask had fallen off because she was staring at it. It lay right next to her on the pillow, the heart monitor in the background.

Why had she had another stroke? She was recovering. The beeping on the monitor began to slow. Lack of oxygen roared in her brain. Cells screamed out in anguish as they slowly died off. People can only survive up to three minutes without oxygen. Before Alice blacked out she finally heard the alarm that would warn the nurses and she tried to relax.

*Pam, it looks like you were right about these machines. They are going to save my life.*

\*

"She had another stroke in the middle of the night. She survived, but it seems like her body couldn't keep up and she passed away in her sleep." Pam, the RN who dealt with her mother most often, was explaining to her. "She wouldn't have been in any pain."

Her mother lay on the bed, her body neatly arranged. Shirley thought she looked peaceful, but she knew better. There was something left in her mother's face. The wires had finally been removed, but the oxygen mask was still sitting firmly in place.



Shirley reached out to touch the rough skin of her mother's hands. Her emotions roiled but one kept rising to a crest: relief. Her mother had been an active woman her entire life. It must have been killing her to be unable to move across the room, much less go outside. Shirley noticed the closed curtains. She tucked her mother's hand back into the bed and opened them with enough force that they came entirely off the wall.