

Todos

Contributed by Karen Condon
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Todos is a short story excerpt from Karen Condon's upcoming novel, *Are You A Survivor?* due out in December 2008. Enjoy this first piece from Karen and come back for more of her wonderful writing ...

- F. Lawrence Caslin

Two rows of mouthless creatures standing in two lines on either side of the operating table, their eyes fixed on me, unmoving. They were waiting for the anesthesia to take effect before they pounced.

We had had two hours to kill before my surgery was scheduled. In the waiting room, my husband and sister sat to my left, and to my right was a woman flipping through an old copy of *People* magazine, front to back, back to front, front to back, back to front, without reading or stopping to look at pictures. I glanced at her to find her glancing at me. "Do you want our newspaper?" I asked her. "We're done with it."

She dropped *People* on the floor in front of her, reached for the newspaper, and looked away, flipping through it in the same manner. The humor drained out of me. She knew something I didn't.

When they called my name, I was up like a shot, and everything was set in motion. I was led to a dressing room. Rick and Nancy were led to another waiting room.

"Take everything off," said the nurse. "Put this on, open in the front."

She handed me a thin robe with blue diamonds all over it, an ice-blue cap, and a pair of flimsy foam slippers that were much longer than my feet. I nodded, and she left.

"Take everything off," I heard another nurse saying to someone standing inside one of the curtained booths where we were to undress. "Open in front."

I stood there clutching my bundle of surgery-wear.

"Take everything off," the nurse repeated, more slowly and loudly. "Everything. Open in front."

I imagined the person inside the booth had her fingers in her ears. Good for her, I thought.

"I don't know Spanish," said the nurse. "No, I don't know Spanish."

Urgent murmuring came from the dressing booth.

"I'll go get someone who speaks Spanish," said the nurse. "I'll be right back."

I inched closer; she hadn't emerged from the booth yet. I peered inside. It was the woman from the waiting room. When she saw me, she started speaking in Spanish, clutching her own bundle of garments and accessories.

"No entiendo," I said. "No hablo espanol."

Which didn't make any sense, because I was speaking Spanish. I was telling her in Spanish that I didn't speak Spanish.

"Un poquito, solamente," I said.

She nodded and held up her index finger. She went into the dressing booth and put the bundle on the bench in there. She came back out and gestured in a sweeping, up-down motion, indicating her entire body.

"What I take?" she asked.

"Todos," I said. "Everything. Todos."

"Gracias!" she said, nodding.

"You're welcome," I said.

We stood there facing each other.

"Are you scared?" I asked her. I knew she probably didn't understand me, which made it easier to say.

She smiled and shrugged.

I pointed to my lump.

"It's cancer," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Cancer."

"Where?" I said. I pointed at my cancer.

"Breast?" I asked. She shook her head.

"Lungs?" I said, gesturing with both hands where my lungs would be. She shrugged. I repeated the question and gesture, this time taking a deep breath and letting it out to indicate the lungs' function. She shook her head. I asked about several other organs -- kidneys, liver, stomach -- trying my best to point at their respective locations, and she shook her head at each one.

"Where, then?" I asked. "Donde?"

She stared at me thoughtfully. She repeated her initial gesture encompassing her entire body.

"Todos," she said. "It is everything."

I don't remember what I did or said then. I may have asked her name, or said something stupid, like I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, or good luck or you are so brave. Probably I said something stupid like that, or, even worse, maybe I cried, as if the woman were already dead, and isn't being dead sad, aren't the dead a pitiable lot? In any case, the next thing I remember is emerging alone from my dressing booth, dressed in operetta regalia, and, after looking around a little for her, going in to the waiting room to sit with my sister and my husband, who were not as afraid of losing me as I was of being lost.

"There was this woman," I said.

Then the nurse who didn't speak Spanish appeared, and I was conveyed to my waiting hospital bed to be prepared with an I.V. and anesthesia.

Finally, I lay on this operating table lined with eight people swathed in pale-blue cotton, four on each side, like pallbearers. I tried to remember the Spanish-speaking woman's name. I thought to ask the surgeon what had happened to her, what her prognosis was, but the words I would need had dissipated. I opened my mouth to speak, wondering and not caring what was going to come out.

"Todos," I said as the surgeon's and her quiet friends' feet left the floor and they began to tilt away from the table. "It is everything."

And the drugs swallowed me whole.