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We are all here

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We are all here

by

Lydia Melby

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Crawl Ashore

The fish is exactly what we need her to be—over five hundred pounds, so large she brushes the walls of the tank with her fins, gills snapping open and shut, slashes of red gaping, then smooth. We watch her as she floats, dazed, and feel the excitement itch in our throats. Lewis tells me how it took him, Rahmad, two spear divers, a deckhand, and the hydraulic winch to haul the fish in. I glance at Rahmad, the other scientist, or the beautiful scientist, as I think of him some days—but he only nods, watching the fish. He would never openly contradict Lewis, one of the men who brought him here from across the world on a grant to join this experiment on fluidsex regeneration. From where I lean against the tank's lip, I could reach and trace the wide black rosettes decorating the grouper's sides, but touching that stretched, iridescent skin before Lewis suggests it seems too eager, something a child would do.

My position in the lab is complicated. With the national birthrate declining, and the percentage of surviving female fetuses at a record low, most women my age have taken advantage of the family incentive program, and either started a family or sold eggs to fund expensive hobbies. I get curious stares in the halls and when I eat in the hospital cafeteria, which is rare, considering the food. I'm one of ten or so women working in this hospital, and the only one under forty. I'd enjoy feeling like a social rebel if my position were a stance I'd chosen, like the older women who pass me in the halls with approving, almost challenging nods. But even though some days I feel like my apparent health, my strong, raw-boned *wholesomeness* radiates off my skin, it's actually a lie. I never got a choice.

But Lewis is family, almost, so here I am—almost 26, living alone, and dissecting fish in a blank refrigerated lab. Two years ago I left a research position in Panama as my dad's Huntington's got worse, and moved to this run-down island floating in the tar-sodden Gulf to care for him. As my father's nerves short-circuited, he started losing control of his body—flailing and breaking wine

glasses, knocking over racks of sample tubes, his head jerking wildly like it was being yanked by a hook under his jaw. Eventually I started going to work with him, to steady his hands and help interpret his slurring, to help him sort hallucination from reality when he lashed out, or huddled in a freezing wind only he could feel. I admit, I felt so guilty sometimes when his weird spells made him ignore or even push Lewis away and turn to me instead, but they broke up years ago, and besides, I was his daughter.

I know now he should have quit long before he got as bad as he did, but he and Lewis had been working on this project for so long, and at first they hid his illness together, from hospital board and grant committees, and from me. Maybe Lewis felt guilt for that too, since he hired me after my father died. I guess I'm useful—I know how to measure growth rates, clone embryos, monitor stem cell cultures, and laugh at Lewis's jokes about why protogynous species have more fun. But I also know my dad asked him to look after me.

Because there's a fifty-fifty chance for me. I got the gene, but there's no predicting if it'll get me. And if it does, the symptoms will come on sooner and faster, even at half my dad's age. If he had just waited, we could have been in hospice together. It's a guessing game, though—all I can do is eat well, take vitamins, exercise obsessively, and wait. Wait until I start dropping spoons or stubbing my toes or working too hard to swallow. Nothing's happened yet, but my heart clenches into a fist whenever I walk into a room and then can't remember why.

He wasn't even the one who told me. I'd gone to the egg donation center, thoughtlessly, and remembering how careless I was about it now makes me sick. I hadn't gotten full funding at my first choice of microbio programs, but I could easily make up the difference by donating, like many of my friends did. It was so simple, they said, and harmless, and helped so many others that it seemed stupid not to choose it. Of course I wanted my own, later, after I'd had time to travel and work and

had money to raise them well. I had so much time for all that.

My friends said the blood work and tests were formalities, really, that demand was so great that even risk of heart disease or severe asthma wouldn't disqualify a donor outright. *They can just splice most of that light stuff out*, they said. And when it came down to it, I passed all the tests but one. They brought me into a separate room when I came for my follow-up, and a doctor, a real geneticist I realized, not one of the physician's assistants I'd seen until now, explained I had the huntingtin gene. I knew what it was, obviously, but I was so stunned I sat and listened to him explain it anyway. Its presence meant I had a fifty percent chance of developing Huntington's Chorea, and a one hundred percent chance of passing the gene to my offspring.

This is the part of the movie where I shake my head and say, but I don't understand, how could this be? I remember thinking. But of course, I did understand. I knew exactly how it worked. They just never told me.

Harvesting the fish is secretly my favorite part. The delicate hum of saws cutting out the eggs and sex organs, the sharp, clear burn of disinfectant, and the triumph on our sweating faces always feels like discovery. We shock the grouper to stun her, drain the tank, and I steady the cable from above as the men wrestle her deadweight onto the gill hooks and crank her vertical. Lewis slits the fish open across her throat to bleed her, and then along her length, letting her organs bulge out like jewels from a purse.

I feel so strangely hopeful on days like this, as if all it takes is a northern wind threading through the March humidity, coaxing the island's temperature down to the nineties, when the sun is filtered through watery clouds until it's cool silk against my skin. On days like these, I run the beaches instead of going to the gym and wearing myself out on the track or the rowing machine.

I settle into sectioning the egg samples as Lewis cleans and packs away the genitals, and

Rahmad takes samples of non-reproductive organs and body fluids. The fish hangs above the drain, slack and empty as a windsock now. Then, Rahmad shouts. I turn and see the excavated stomach, the usual mess of kelp and rotting fish, green and gold weeds tangled with splintered bones, the brine and sting of stomach fluids making my eyes water. And there, knotted in with it, a greyish length of something ropy and twisted. Rahmad cuts away the heavy kelp and strange web, his hands calm and still somehow. He pulls the layers back, and swears.

Inside, there is a child—a boy, small and twisted, the color of wax.

I freeze and try to count up the certain things around me—the cold table, the background dripping, the rancid, sticky smell of the mess.

After a moment, Lewis sees my face and says, You're okay, you're all right.

I open my eyes—the child really is there, and Rahmad and Lewis are there, *and really*, I think, *that's a bit much for a first hallucination, surely they would start more quietly.*

But the child isn't bloated or spongy like the drowned pets that wash onto the beach; his skin is oddly smooth and new looking, translucent. His arms wrap around himself, tiny hands nearly meeting behind his shoulders, and his collarbone is broken and bent like a paper clip. I walk around the table and see his deflated ribcage, his spine twisted and stretched like a broken necklace. Gulf water and the fish's stomach acid have dyed his hair grey and yellow and green, and it is impossibly long, wrapping around his knees, tangling in his toes. Judging by his size, he couldn't have been older than seven when he died.

He must have been alive when he was swallowed, Rahmad says, tracing the broken slope of his pelvis. He points to how the child buried his face in the crooks of his elbows. See?

I try to imagine his terror, his bubbling screams, and have to swallow away the spit that pools in my throat.

Why is he bent like that? I ask.

The hard plates in a grouper's throat grind whatever the fish swallows, Rahmad explains. Since they don't have teeth.

He wasn't just alive when he was swallowed, Lewis says, and I watch him pinch the skin on the child's shoulder and upper arm, touching his hair at the roots. He is alive now.

What?

Rahmad breathes in slowly. That is impossible.

Touch him.

The child's skin is firm and gives under my fingertips, neither tough and leathery or soggy like I expected. His drying hair feels dead, like the webs oak parasites make in the summer, but I look at the length, how it tangles around and around him, and realize it's been growing for years.

The scans Lewis runs show the child's vitals are still and blank, but he's right, in a sense. The child's skin and nails and hair, even his frail bones and his tissue paper muscles, are regenerating somehow, nearly alive. We look again at his hair, his eyelids drawn tight around sockets, that have been empty for a long time, and Lewis estimates he was swallowed seven, eight, maybe ten years ago.

Rahmad runs a hair sample, but the search comes up blank, unmatched, despite the mandatory national and international DNA registries. I think of the sprawling, listless families living on the far west side of the island—fishers and seasonal workers, gypsies who squat their trailers on hurricane-ruined lots and park at mainland Wal-Marts until storm season is past. These people don't register, don't send their children to school, don't pay taxes or vote. They fish and barter services and sell handmade goods on free-ware sites. We all know it would be impossible to find those parents, but Rahmad argues, always our voice of reason.

We must give him to the police, he says. We cannot keep this a secret.

You know what we could learn from this, Lewis says. What this could mean for treating injuries, degenerative diseases.

We cannot keep someone's *child*.

Lewis begins to say something about how his visa extension depends on this job, but I interrupt him.

Just for two weeks, I say. Please, Rahmad. Can't we just try?

And you? Surely you see how that—

Rahmad! I shout, smacking the flat of my hand against the table. It stings and the *snap* hangs for a second in the cold air of the lab. Lewis and Rahmad look at me, mouths open and I clench my fists to keep from grabbing the glassware I suddenly want to throw.

Rahmad this could change *everything*. Just let us try.

He only looks at me, his eyes wide and dark and heavy-lashed, then finally nods.

I sold all my dad's furniture a week after he died, and though Lewis was angry with me at first, he accepted the oversized ostrich leather armchair he had given my dad eight years before. When he and Rahmad came to pick it up, he could barely make eye contact with me, more from sadness than resentment, I knew, but it was Rahmad who touched the back of my arm and asked if I was sure.

I won't use it, I said. There's no point in it getting salty and cracked in the humidity.

Ah, Rahmad said. You don't have a dehumidifier? I will bring you one of mine.

I'd probably forget to empty it and flood the apartment.

You wouldn't, he said, shaking his head and smiling. You cannot forget the joy of sleeping through the night without your sheets plastered to you and the walls around you sweating.

I shrugged. It's never bothered me that much.

But you would get more sleep. Your body needs rest. You should exercise less.

My body needs to be as healthy as possible, I said, trying not to be irritated at his concern.

His frown looked slightly pained. Yes, but still. Please rest.

In the beginning, he'd been careful to treat me like an equal in the lab, not just a tech or a woman, but in the year and half after my dad died, he and Lewis had both gotten more and more conscious of my health, protective almost. For a time, I'd let herself imagine what Rahmad's mouth would feel like, how he would be so measured, so considerate, when he touched me, and I wondered if he would be the kind of father who sings while putting his children to bed. But it didn't matter, really, since I could never pass on my genetics on to another person. No child should have to watch their parent wither and twist into someone unrecognizable, and then wait for it to happen to them too.

After Rahmad leaves, I watch Lewis take subcutaneous samples with a hollow needle, then carefully measure and cut away four parallel strips from the child's thigh, flaying off deep layers of skin to show greyish, slackened muscle. I can't help but gag while I watch, though the wounds barely leak a thin colorless fluid, but Lewis explains he wants to measure the child's regeneration rate, guessing it's probably twice a normal human's, which is how his skin is mostly unaffected by the fish's stomach acid.

Jonah, he says, grinning. A prophet in a fish, sent to save the world.

That is not how the story goes, but I nod and trace the seams where the child's skin has somehow fused his knees together, welding his cheeks to his arm. His nails have grown until they burrowed into the skin on his back, punctures healed around the long, spiraled claws like buttonholes.

But what if it *was* the fish? I ask. What if she's what kept him alive?

Lewis gives me his condescending man look, and explains it's not likely, but promises to run

some tests on the fish, too. He pokes my shoulder gently with his middle knuckle, and with a twist of both love and resentment, I recognize a gesture he got from my father.

When I leave for the night, I'm so keyed up I run the first mile full tilt, pounding down Church Street past where the hospital buildings give way to historic homes, where the doctors and professors sit in their front yards with their children, drinking and talking to neighbors while watching them play. The houses grow shorter, sinking into the ground until they become trailers nested into the tall grasses. I slow at the beginning of Seawall, and turn to run parallel to the shore. No tourists here—the sand is always loose and wind-mussed, calm waves glowing. The contaminated water can't sustain bioluminescent bacteria, but on cool nights when the air sharpens, the oily film reflects diffuse, pastel light.

I take the steps down to the sand slowly, catching my breath. No one comes to this beach at night, since the city beaches are safer and cleaner, so I strip and balance my clothes on my shoes, and wade out past where the waves tip and wreck, until I can flip on my back in the gentle rolling cold and rest, the only living thing caught in the seam where water joins the air.

I haven't really let myself swim in this tainted water since my dad died, since Rahmad warned me of the toxin levels. But tonight, I only think of what we can do with this child. *No matter how dirty the water gets*, I decide, *I will swim like this every night from now on*. I gulp in as much of the crystalline air as I can hold, the water slipping into my mouth as I laugh. I'm alive, I'm going to be fine, and tonight I slip through clouds of hazy warm water, dragging ribbons of cold, while the breeze and night-silence and distant hum of the city washes past me.

And there. Something slick-skinned and muscular bumps my leg, dragging its length along the bottom of my calf, and I flail upright to tread water. Water splits and beads off my arms as I stroke across the surface, trying to see farther in, but the water is a rolling mirrored surface, impossible.

Surely I'm too close to shore, I think, *too big to be prey*, and my heart slaps against my ribs, a shattering pulse I never feel even when I sprint, and something snaps and then I'm livid, diving under the surface and flailing around, hands open to grab this thing circling me in the dark water, and again and again I break for air and go back under, my eyes burning with the salt and the oil, though I can't see six inches ahead in the black, and finally I'm shrieking and gasping too hard to catch my breath, so I swim back into shore, too fast and kicking up too much foam behind me.

When I get home, my hands are shaking so hard I have to clutch my own wrist to guide the key into the lock. I go straight to the kitchen to get some water, but I miss somehow, cracking the glass against the sink, getting the jagged pieces everywhere. I drop to the rug with my knees up, catching my breath, then call Lewis to tell him the story of something huge that close to shore, even before tourist season, but also so I hear him explain how the stress of the day, the adrenaline rush and the fear would make anyone's hands shake.

It calms me down, and I tell him yes, yes I'm done for the night, I promise to get some sleep. I hang up and watch the pictures of fish my dad collected and framed float around me on the walls—watercolor illustrations from science texts of Triggerfish, Eagle Ray, Surgeonfish, Pompano, fish vanished from the gulf before I was born. He used to guide my fingers in tracing their bright-skinned arches and dips, showing me jewel-toned bass and groupers with wide bands whipped across their backs.

Now that barracudas and sharks are gone, he'd say, and once porpoises disappear too, these fish will become the new predators, the top of their food chain.

Years later, he would sometimes add, And when we've stopped reproducing completely, when people are gone, these giant fish will be the next thing to crawl ashore and start walking.

Two nights before he died, I woke up to my dad shouting in the apartment's courtyard, and found him circling the shallow reflection pool, bent and peering at the gold-scummed surface. He grabbed my elbow when I got close and pointed, an unlit cigarette still in his hand, trying to show me some dark shape swimming around and around.

A shark, he whispered. I'm almost positive.

Of course there was nothing there. I told him it was just the shadow from the fountain, but he was convinced, squatting down closer to guess what kind—nurse, he said, no, white tip, bull-nose. When I reminded him those sharks had been extinct for years, he stood and grabbed my arm, yanking my face close.

You think I'm stupid? he asked. You think I don't know that? I know more about marine predators than most of the world. More than some lazy, whining dropout. A lot more.

I took a deep breath, said no, no of course he was right, and settled down beside him to wait. He sat watching, his mouth slackened a little, for almost twenty minutes. And then, like always, he started frowning, squinting, wondering why he couldn't see it anymore, wondering what he even thought was there. I rubbed his back, tentatively, as he got quiet, and there by the pool, he pulled me into a hug and started crying, crushing me while his body shook.

What I hated most about these episodes wasn't his sudden anger, or his slow, cold conviction of how evil or worthless I was, or even my fear that he could injure himself. What I hated was that moment when clarity would drop back into his mind like a coin, and he would realize how far he had gone, how far he would still go in the few years he had left.

If he hadn't tied a bucket of cement to his waist and carried it out into the bay one night, my father would have become ancient, in a way. A withered, shivering mind in a tall, lean-muscled body.

The next day, we find the acidity and enzymes of the grouper's stomach fluids hold nothing unusual, other than a slightly higher level of protein. But the thick swaths of scabs that cover the child's legs grew thinner and lighter overnight, healing at an almost visible rate. Lewis has me test mitochondria size and density while he sections the biopsy samples into a varied series of formalin, each a slightly different shade of fluorescent yellow. The graduated rack of these tubes set behind the bio hood remind me of the votive stands I used to see in cathedrals, a miniature choir of glowing candle prayers.

The next day, the temperature is back around 117, and I sweat through my dry-tech running clothes. The threat of summer, predicted to be the worst in a decade, has chased the rich to their summer homes early, emptying whole neighborhoods into silence.

In the lab, Lewis slits the seam where the child's arms have fused with his cheeks, and I help him pull Jonah's elbows away from his face. His mouth hangs open, his lips blistered and leathery. I try to not look inside, but still see his pale yellow gums, his tongue covered with thick white fungus. I feel sick, but hold the tiny ribcage tight while Lewis bends the crooked arm back into place, first the elbow joint, then the shoulder, each crack like wet branches breaking. He straightens Jonah's bent collarbone and limbs, then threads a long needle into the broken bones to take marrow samples. I swallow the bile in my throat and sit on the cold floor, and Lewis kneels and pats my back for a second.

It's okay, he says. Anyone would get dizzy.

I sit listening while Lewis outlines his hope for using the child's stem cells to develop a serum to quicken bone growth and regeneration. Scoliosis, bone cancer, wreck victims, he says. We could cure all of it, treat skin and nerve disorders, maybe even genetic disorders. He glances at me. This

can change everything.

I let myself imagine swimming every night in the bay, floating forty, fifty years from now in the luminous pastel water.

A few minutes later, he calls me over to the table.

Here, look at this, he says. He opens the child's mouth farther, dragging out a long tangle of seaweed. *Jesus*, he says, how did he swallow this much? He passes the bulk to me, and as it pools in my hands, I feel a flutter, a quick, faint pulse. Lewis peers into the child's mouth with his penlight, and I walk to the sink, peeling back the tangles of seaweed to find a small, bright fish—short and thick-muscled, almost as big as my fist, and brilliant, brilliant red. It jackknifes back and forth in my grip, alive somehow. Water, I think, *water*, and fill the biggest beaker I can find with sterile salt water. It floats, for a moment, then flaps and begins to circle the round space. Washing the beakers and flasks and other glassware is my job, of course, so Lewis and Rahmad would never see it back here.

I try not to think about why it has to be a secret.

Jonah's breaks mend at a remarkable rate. It only takes a couple of days for me to convince Lewis to get an incubator—to *control temperature and humidity*, I say. I even bring in a soft blanket to lay him on, though both of them give me a funny look.

Lewis starts sleeping in the lab, desperate for more time, so I bring in my own sleeping bag and watch him work late, helping mix cultures and recording hourly data when I can. Some nights I don't sleep, but stand next to the incubator, watching, reaching in to touch the places where Jonah's collarbone is thickening, my fingertips so light on his skin I'm never actually sure if I touched him. Some nights I jar awake, but Jonah is always still, of course, a strange little figure carved from wax.

Some mornings I wake up to see Lewis looking down at him, his hair bent at strange angles.

Some mornings Lewis wakes up to see me doing the same. We compare notes on every crumb of data, speculate endlessly on where he came from and how he got to be like this, but we don't talk about what his strange rapid regeneration could mean for people like me.

On the seventh morning after, though, Lewis finds the growth progress has slowed by almost twenty percent. He calls for Rahmad and yells at him to finish the DNA sequencing already, then cuts new skin samples for stem cultures. When I turn the ventilator of the biosafety cabinet on, its usual hum is bigger, harsher. I ask Lewis if it's louder, and though he shakes his head, smiling the way he always does, I notice Rahmad watching me closely. I turn back to my work, but count the tangibles under my breath—the noise of my shoes on the cement, the cold air seeping out of the fridge, the smell of sea-brine in my hair when I move, the grit of sand in my socks and under the soles of my shoes.

But by the ninth morning, Jonah's healing has slowed to more than a third of what it was, approaching the rate of a normal human. Of course even a normal rate of regeneration would be miraculous, given the child's state, but none of us mentions it.

When I come back from my run that afternoon, it's Rahmad I find standing next to the incubator, sequencing prints spread beside him.

You found something? I ask.

Yes and no, he says. There is no easy explanation, but see this sequence of active genes? He points to a highlighted strand, a tiny spot of yellow. It has never been recorded before.

What? Are you sure?

How could I be sure? I am not a geneticist, not really. I will check again, and again, but this is something beyond us.

Lewis thinks we can use his DNA to cure people, I say, though coming from me, the words sound so simple, so *naïve*.

He shakes his head. I wish we could put him back. We should have left him, let him sleep. Perhaps the fish would have spit him out a long time from now, and he would have turned into something different.

Rahmad, I say, what are you talking about? We have the technology to do this, to use this for something— I fumble for the word, and suddenly can't remember what it was I wanted to say.

He lays a hand on my shoulder, but says nothing. His grip is heavier than he means, probably, and for a second, I have to fight the urge to slip out from under it. But the moment passes and instead I lean against him, surprising him, though he tightens his arm around my shoulders.

A minute goes by like this, then Rahmad asks me to give Lewis the printouts and leaves to go back upstairs to the sequencing computer. I wonder, briefly, where Lewis is—it's rare that I'm in the lab alone. I lean over him and trace the scars from the first samples Lewis took, wounds healed shiny and stretched in just that length of time. I touch his mouth, checking to see if the fungus I scrubbed away last week has returned, but it hasn't. His tongue, though limp and just as translucent grey as the rest of him, is clean now at least, and I let myself imagine waking up one morning to see the first flush of pink returning to his paper-thin lips.

I reach in to turn him on his other side—I've started doing this every day, since lying in one position too long can't be good for whatever it is circulating through his skin—and when I slide my hands under his back I find ragged patches of flayed skin, new and still sticky with fluid. I ease him onto his stomach and see five new swaths skinned off his back, imprecisely done and poorly measured.

Would Rahmad have done this? I think. Or Lewis? Why would they want to keep it a secret?

One of cuts looks like it was finished in a hurry, and there is a little tag of skin hanging from

one end. I touch it, hoping Lewis is right and there's no way he can feel pain. His skin is just as soft and pliable as I imagine normal skin is, but it's so thin and delicate, the piece tears off in my fingers with almost no effort. I stare at it for a moment before I raise my hand and put it in my mouth.

Immediately I want to spit it out, but I clap my hand over my mouth to keep it shut. *What the fuck did I just do*, I think. *Why did I just do that*, but even as I wonder this I'm chewing, carefully, noticing the stale vinegar taste, how the texture of his skin disintegrates in my mouth.

And then, I swallow, and cut away three more pieces and eat them as well, whispering *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. It'll grow back, I promise. I'm sorry.*

The night before my father drowned himself, he took me to the little pho diner across the street from our apartment, a remodeled gas station with the decrepit pump still in the parking lot. This wasn't unusual—we ate here all the time—but when our food came, he asked for chopsticks, and slowly arranged his fingers around them. It had been one of his good days, but while we ate, he told me, again, how I had to stay healthy, to be careful to not miss any vaccines, to exercise and get all my vitamins.

You should do everything you can, everything. We still aren't even sure why it affects some people and others not at all, so not a single aspect of your health is unimportant.

I know, Dad. I'm doing—we're both doing everything we can, you know that. Let's talk about something else.

I should have helped you, he said, ignoring me. If only I had known, I—it could have been different.

He *had* known, for years, before I found out, and had chosen not to tell me, but I knew what he meant. Instead I pointed at his bowl and said, You're pretty good with those chopsticks. Way

better than me.

He paused. Well. Sometimes, it isn't so hard, he said. Not all the time. You need to remember that, okay?

Dad, I said. It's okay. You're okay. You're doing really well. We're both doing fine.

But he had dropped his face into his hands, saying, I'm sorry. I'm just so sorry.

It's this last dinner I think about when I slip out and jog the staircases after dinner, ten days after we found Jonah inside the fish. Even with this exhaustion, even as the lights flicker on the edge of my vision, I have to stay healthy. Beyond just that it could slow how quickly the Huntington's would take over my mind and body if it comes, I also feel like if I don't keep moving, if I don't keep myself stripped to a bundle of raw nerve and burning muscle, exhausted, I won't sleep at night, and time won't actually move, and I will never get to the point where I can finally say *that's it, now I'm safe*.

But on my third lap around the building, the steps seem to reel and pitch under my feet, and on my fifth pass I stumble. My fingers brush the railing and I fall headfirst, the pain snapping across my face like a whip, the crack echoing in my skull before everything fades off.

When I open my eyes, the light inside has gone dim and slick puddles of brackish water pool on the stairs, as if they haven't been used since the last storm, though when I get closer I see it's just a trick of the light. I half-crawl, half-slide down the last steps to the lab door.

Rahmad opens when I knock, still on the ground, shouts, and helps me into a chair. He touches the swelling beside my eye and holds the cold pack Lewis brings against it.

What happened? Did you fall?

I laugh and make a joke about being clumsy, trying focus through the fog of pain.

Lewis nods and smiles, squatting in front of me. It isn't bad, he says, I promise.

I nod, my skull a balloon on the end of a straw.

It'll get dark, but I think it's fine. We'll wait a bit, watch the swelling, and we can go from there. You'll be fine.

Enough. Rahmad says, standing. You both have to stop this now.

Stop? I say. Stop working?

Well, perhaps that as well, but I mean this foolishness—working all day and night, sleeping in the lab, neglecting our real project for this, this crime you've committed. You're exhausted, you're ill and for what—what results? We don't have the capability here to properly experiment on this child.

Are you kidding? Lewis says. In another week, I can give her an injection that could heal that bruise, that could heal *everything*. Don't you get it?

Wishful thinking, he says. I don't care if you threaten my job, it does not matter anymore. You have made me part of a crime I could not explain if I wanted to.

Lewis quivers, mouth open, but for a second they are quiet as my vision blurs and sharpens. I reach for Rahmad's wrist and say his name, a whisper.

Rahmad, let's talk about this tomorrow.

He turns to me and I say, Please, can you just take me home?

Rahmad walks me inside, and when he turns to go, something makes me keep hold of his sleeve and ask him to stay.

Don't leave yet, I say, part of me wondering what I'm doing when all I want to was to take painkiller and pass out.

He looks concerned and puts a hand on my forehead, as if my temperature could be the problem.

I'm fine, I say, speaking so softly he has to bend to hear it. I'm fine, I just—

And then I step forward, pressing against him, pushing him back against the wall. We are nearly the same height—I don't even have to stretch when I grab his arms and kiss him, all force and open mouth and teeth bumping, his breath hot on my face.

I pull my shirt over my head and I watch his face as he touches the hard, flat plane of my stomach, running his hands down the corded lines of my arms, my breasts pressed down in a sports bra. He's seen me in workout clothes before—I run to and from the office almost every day—so I wonder if his surprise is just at how utterly *healthy* I look, when all along he's been imagining me as some sort of fragile, consumptive heroine from an old novel.

I'm not sick yet, I think, and grab him by the hair at the base of his skull, yank his head forward and kiss him hard, pulling his shirt off too. He is slender and long limbed, with that soft layer of skin and unused muscle all these scientist seem to have, and I grip his waist, pressing my face into his neck, overwhelmed now with the desire to burrow into him somehow, to tear into that supple skin and touch the delicate organs inside.

I push against him until he's stumbling back into my bedroom and falling onto the bed. He grabs at my shoulders, my arms, protesting, pushing back, but I am everywhere—my hands splayed on his chest, unzipping his pants, my legs tangling with his, my mouth, my teeth on his throat, catching his skin, and he gasps and pushes me harder, *wait, stop*, he says, and something in me snaps and I push back and say *quiet*, grabbing his wrists and yanking his arms above his head, pinning him to the mattress, and we struggle like that together, my mind a knot of confusion at what I'm doing and triumph, yes, pleasure at the fact that if nothing else, at least I have this power, this solely physical control over another person.

And then, just as if I'm waking up, I realize what I'm doing, and let go of Rahmad's arms, and scramble off of him and sit against the wall, mumbling apologies behind my hand.

What is going on with you? he says. He looks bewildered, though not angry, and I shake my head, blinking, trying to focus on one still point in the room. He leans toward me to wipe my cheek, and I realize I'm pouring sweat, even inside with the air conditioning on. A shiver grips me and runs along my nerves, ending in my stomach and I feel sick, like when I was a kid and would sit in my dad's office chair and spin and spin until I threw up.

I— I'm sorry, I say, I feel really weird all of a sudden. I didn't meant to— I put a hand to the side of my head, and the room stills with a jolt, when I hadn't even realized it was moving.

I think I need to lie down, I'm really sleepy.

I can imagine so. He nods and brushes the hair off my forehead.

You've hit your head, he says, even if you think it was nothing, and you've been working so hard, and all your crazy running and exercising on top of it. It's too much.

I clench my jaw to keep from snapping back that I'm fine, but he doesn't.

Let's lie down for a little, all right? he says, and I nod and lay next to him on top of the quilt, my head resting on his arm, and though I don't move any closer than that, he curls himself around me, his nose and lips barely touching the back of my neck. After a moment, my eyes open, and I stare at the ceiling and around the room, too keyed up to rest even while I can feel him drifting away behind me.

It had been my dad's room— when I first moved in, I slept in the study, a little closet of a room with no window and a useless AC vent. Sometimes, on bad days, my dad, my gentle, passive, fish-obsessed dad, would trap me in my bedroom for hours, roaring and throwing things if I came out before he gave me permission, calling me filthy names, words I still had trouble even thinking. He chased me with a steak knife me once, cutting a gash across my upper arm that bled while he wept and begged me to forgive him, to understand this person wasn't him, that he didn't know who it was living in his mind now and could only watch while things like this happened.

It was so hard to believe him sometimes, no matter how much I learned about the disease's psychiatric symptoms. I'd watch his face sometimes as it twisted into a mask of rage or sneering frustration, and think, *there's no way this is coming out of nowhere. This is just a part of him I never saw until now.*

Rahmad doesn't wake up when I leave, silent on my bare feet. My building is old, outdated in so many ways, and the deadbolt lock on my front door only turns with the key, no matter which side you're on, and I take my keys with me as I go, and bolt the door behind me. I'm not sure how long we lay there—long enough for me to catalogue the sure things, including Rahmad lying warm against my back, and this wretched, alien self I could become any time.

Lewis barely looks up when I come back into the lab, only nods when I say I feel fine, and I realize how long it's been since he slept too.

Tomorrow, he says, I'll need to take new samples, start a different batch of cultures too.

Why? Are these no good?

He looks up at me standing next to the racks of glowing yellow tubes. No, those are viable, but if Rahmad's about to turn the child in tomorrow, I need to have as much to work from as possible.

He's not going have much skin left soon, I say.

Well, it's not like he was ever going to need it, right? Lewis rolls his eyes at me and goes back to his microscope. Besides, even if this kid's parents turn out to still be alive, and they come to identify him, they'd never recognize him. Look at him, would you even know your kid after eight years or so in a fish's gut?

The beaker is in my hand before I realize, and I throw it hard, missing, and both Lewis and I jump when it bursts across the steel cabinet behind him, spraying glass and glitter in the bright light. I try to speak but only manage a low, strangled noise, and he looks at me with this horrible, shocked recognition on his face. He edges toward me, takes my elbow, and guides me over to one of the chairs.

Here, sit down, you're okay, he says, touching my forehead, you're just exhausted. We both are! And you've had a hard day. Maybe you should sleep a little.

Lewis, I ask, will you check on my fish?

Your what?

My fish. The little red fish. It's behind the sink, in a beaker.

The room tilts as he walks to the sink, his steps slow. I pull my knees up under my chin, and close my eyes, just for a second. It's cold in the lab, it's always so cold.

Years pass, it seems, and everything twists, awareness coming in waves, so that when he kneels beside me again, telling me there is no fish in the empty beaker, there never was, I just nod and say okay, finally getting it.

I wake up hours later and see Lewis asleep too, folded into his leather chair like a stork. The lab is empty and silent, clean as the inside of an eggshell. I look around and wonder what we ever used half of these instruments for, and stretch, feeling the knobs of my hipbones connecting with the hard floor through my sleeping bag, the persistent film of sand grit against my chin.

Carefully, quietly, I stand and walk to the rack of stem cell cultures, pure distillations of the child's flesh and genetic code. I grab the brightest one, a vibrant yellow with its little chunk of flesh a floating blur, and screw the cap on it, suddenly so aware of its delicacy, of how easily it could drop,

shatter and leak away.

The child seems smaller, too, when I gather him up, and I am so careful, folding his limbs and wrapping him in the blanket. Somehow, I get the door open quietly, balancing him against my hip, and when I shut the door carefully behind me, the world stays asleep.

It's a short walk, one I do every day—here is the beach at night, here is the warm breeze, the empty stretch of sand, the dark water that will shine violet and jade in just a couple of hours. I hold Jonah higher as I wade in, careful not to splash him. I should have left a note, I think, realizing my disappearance could be misinterpreted. Even my father left a note. I imagine Lewis shouting at journalists, Rahmad quietly declining to comment, but I am worrying too late. Here is the water, moving soft around my ankles, here is the grasp of seaweed, the feeling of shell splintering under my feet as I walk out to where the current sways against my waist. I lift the child higher, pressing his cool forehead against my neck, keeping his head above water. When it's deep enough for the water to slip over my shoulders, I pull out the tube and unscrew the cap with my teeth.

Maybe I should have taken a syringe, I think, jabbed it straight into my bloodstream. Maybe this won't be enough. Maybe I should have taken more of the samples, and maybe I should have left them all behind. No one ever knows how to prepare for something like this, not even when we know for years what is coming, not even if we can handpick the fish that swallows us, and so in the end, I decide to just close my eyes and hold the tube up to my lips and drink, the taste that floods into my mouth drawing out an ache lodged somewhere deep inside.

Names of the body

Dawn turns to face the queen of cities, and Adnan wakes just before the muezzin's call. He rises, as he does every morning, imagining the chant settling across Beyoğlu like a river of silk, rippling on the breeze. Like every morning since he came of age, he crouches, pressing his forehead to the rough boards of his cold, bare room, his body crumpled toward Ka'bah. The stiffness in his muscles makes him aware of each fiber and tendon in his back, sides, thighs—he has never been so present in his own body before he came here. Because he has no chair, he stands shivering at his table each night to study, hunched over the pages as he tries to read in the bobbing light of the candle, the faint glow coming in from the street where, even at this time, people are still walking and carrying parcels and calling out to each other. Adnan never thought that so many people would need so little sleep, and night is when he most longs for the quiet of his own village, the sound of locusts creaking in the dark, his sister's sleep-grumbling clear even from the women's room.

But in the morning he forms his mouth around the words of declaration and reminds himself that at this moment, his mother and sister also feel the same stretch and give in their own bodies as they kneel and bow too.

All across this empire, he thinks, people I know, those I've eaten with and argued with and studied with are doing the same.

Even in Beyoğlu, even in this city seething with clamor, the people are still Allah's, he tells himself, so he should not think of himself as alone.

Yet when he joins with the other boarders downstairs for breakfast, there is the empty chair beside him, and as he walks along the street to the university, no one meets his gaze for longer than a moment.

Because they know Adnan is a country boy, the other boarders ignore him, passing dishes over his head at the table, shrugging silently in answer to his rare questions, until they have an ailment—fever, aching back, knee swollen like a goat's udder. Then, they send for his help, as if he has always been in their minds. At least once a week, an old woman who lives in the house raps on his door with someone sick or hurt cowering behind her, and he follows them to the empty dining room. He does what he can, always protesting that he is not a doctor yet and has no knowledge.

His father's instruction to come to this university to learn medicine had shocked everyone nearly as much as his sudden departure had. Adnan had never spoken of learning medicine, had never even considered it before. The only reason his father chose this for him, he believes now, is because as a child, Adnan spent every free moment at the side of the herbalist in their village, carrying wood for the aging man and grinding the nuts and dried leaves he would mix into strange, milky jars.

If a mullah like my father, who keeps his ear so close to Allah's lips, he wonders, decides your path, do you trust it is Allah's intention too?

What his father never knew was that the herbalist had a crock full of sugar cubes, and would give him one in exchange for his help. He also kept a cat, affectionate and fat like a lump of dough, nothing like the village ratters that skulked along the edges of his vision. These two things alone were enough to keep Adnan coming to the herbalist's, especially when his quietness, his birthright as the next mullah, his love of flowering plants and shiny insects, made him irresistible prey for the other boys in the village. But while he watched closely as the herbalist sorted dried plants, ground and mixed them into a broth, and though he always did as he was instructed, Adnan never felt any desire for the work beyond the simple urge to please.

In his first days at the university, he had listened with dread as the other medical students

traded stories of early apprenticeship at the apothecary's or wild experiences of being the only child to know to splint the bone before carrying an injured friend home. It seemed that each of them are following the path of a father or uncle, each confident this is the correct place for him, and Adnan had worried that when they turned to him, he would be caught, his fraudulence and reluctance on display in the midst of their enthusiasm.

But the people who come to him for help ignore his protests, and he does his best, stitching what little he's learned of the body's workings to what little he remembers of the herbalist's instructions, and he is lucky, or those who come to him are, because it is always a simple thing—a man who turned his ankle while chasing a mule in the street; a young wife with her two chaperones who tells him she woke with a hot, thick feeling in her head and a scratch like sand in her eyes; even a child with a glass bead lodged far up into her nostril, who swore she had no knowledge of how it had come to be there, and continued, after it was flushed out, shining in a wad of snot, to say she had never seen it before. After listening to her protests, the child's mother had glared at Adnan as if he had tricked them, producing the bead the way a magician finds gold inside a person's ear.

“The initial meeting between students of the human body and their first cadaver is the most symbolically defining event in the life of the medical student.” The surgeon from Italy pauses, smiling into the gaze of each of the nineteen students around him. “This rite of passage,” he says, “equally anticipated and feared, tangibly marks your transition from the pursuit of philosophy of how men are made, to the pursuit of physicality, the truth of it.

“Here, in this chamber, you will learn the true form of the body—the weight of each organ, the shape of each bone, the knit of every muscle. But you will not stand by mutely and watch me, as if I were a common butcher. Rather, each of you will have a hand in unstitching this body before us. Each meeting I expect you to have memorized the placement of every muscle, vessel and sinew, and

then demonstrate this knowledge in turns.”

A hollow ringing fills Adnan’s ears. When one student, a clumsy Greek who smells always of garlic, protests that none of them has ever cut before, the others snicker while the surgeon smiles and says that is the idea, that they will practice on this unfortunate man, as it is generally best to begin with a patient impossible to injure. Adnan clenches his teeth. *You know nothing*, he thinks, *you know nothing of the ways we might be injured after death.*

His father had been the only mullah in three villages, as he was the eldest son of the mullah before him, who was the son of a mullah, who had been the grandson of a shaykh. But when the Janissaries had burned the mosque and taken its relics and finery, his father had torn his robe and buried the shreds, and told Adnan his studies for hafiz were finished.

“Medicine, healing,” he’d said, “this is what the empire needs now, not the chants of an old man in an empty mosque. The world is changing, and will soon be a place not one of us recognizes.”

Within the week of this alarming declaration, his father disappeared. Rumors came back to them—he had gone to the city, he had gone to fight in the Sultan’s new militia, and most startling of all, he had been given his own regiment to lead into the fray.

His mother still wept for him, praying each day for his return to both his home and his faith, and though Adnan did as he was told, he carries fear for his father’s soul like a stone in the back of his throat.

The surgeon guides the students through dissection, but true to his word, does not help them as they grapple with the leathery skin, the thin layer of fat that greases their fingers into rancid clumsiness. He rarely corrects them if they stumble over the unfamiliar terms, but his quick look snaps across them like a lash. The surgeon speaks passable Turkish, at least, but requires them to

learn the names of the body in Latin. At least he is wise enough to not insist they learn the Greek terms as well.

Adnan struggles through the muscles, the organs, the layers of skin, committing them to memory each night after dinner, repeating the names over and over—*parenchyma*, *stroma*, *myocardium*— words worn smooth from use, words he comes to know so well they no longer have meaning other than their rumble and hiss under his breath. He hopes this will steady his hands when it is his turn to open the body and explain its workings. He worries he will fumble the blade and cut away the muscle with ragged strokes, or slip and tear the intestines, or break the delicate welding of rib to breastbone. He worries he will be the only one who disrespects this body. Also he worries he will be the only one who cares if it is disrespected or not.

The old woman knocks on his door, and when he opens it, he is surprised to see she is alone, for once, and holding the right side of her stomach. She is one of the stranger residents, inexplicably accompanying his complainants and standing behind them, watching him poke and stutter through his lack of experience. At first he'd assumed she was a grandmother or mother-in-law, but now realizes she must be the one who found out his university studies and decided to make use of his training. He can't imagine why a stern-faced skeptical woman older than his mother would trust a country boy she knows nothing about.

But like always, he follows her to the empty kitchen table, and tries to explain he is only in his first year of training and was studying to be a mullah before that.

“A mullah?” she says. “Now that is a respectable position.”

“Yes. My father was the mullah for three villages, until the Janissaries came and burned our mosque and several other buildings.”

“Ah,” she says. “Yes, we have all suffered from the changing of ways.”

He nods, unnerved by her lack of outrage or sympathy, by her lack of any reaction at all. He can't think of what to say next, and after a moment of full silence, she leans back and sighs noisily.

“You should ask about a person's pain, first, if you want to heal them. You have to know where it is.”

He waits for her to continue, then realizes he is expected to ask about her pain just as she said, and does.

“My belly,” she says, touching her stomach. “I feel as though I've eaten straw and gravel only for the last month.”

Though his immediate reaction is to want to ask her if she has indeed been eating straw and gravel, he stops himself and only nods.

The woman waits a moment for him to speak, then gives him another impatient look. “Don't you want to know when I feel the pain?”

Again, she waits until he parrots her question, then nods. “I feel the pain mostly when I eat, or just a bit after, and it doesn't hurt me to touch the place. No, nothing has changed in my daily habit, and no, I have had no accidents or falls within this year, and no, I no longer suffer from my monthly blood.” She shakes her head. “When an old woman comes to you and does not know how to answer the questions you are not asking, what will you do? Stare at her until Allah himself comes?”

Adnan's face grows hot. *It shouldn't matter*, he thinks, *I did not seek her out to make boasts about my knowledge*, but there it is, this old desire to please, to do the wishes of his elders and earn their smiles and praise, so he apologizes once more for his inexperience.

After a minute of silence, he thinks of a relevant question. “Do you eat mostly what is served here?” he asks. The mistress of the house cooks cheap, thick meals full of meat scraps and hard grains, either still raw and harsh or boiled to the consistency of sun-warmed clay.

The woman nods, approving, and adds that while food is food and taste forgotten once you

swallow, she sometimes closes her eyes as she eats and holds her breather against the smell.

Adnan asks to touch her stomach, and is surprised by how easily she agrees, and sits up straighter. He presses a hand against her, first the left side of her abdomen, then the right, upper half, then lower, his face burning. But other than a slight fullness of the intestine, he feels nothing strange, and tells her that he thinks her stomach is blocked by heavy food, that perhaps she should eat only yogurt and soft fruits, if she can, for the next week.

The woman frowns. “That is all, then? So much discomfort for some gristle and undercooked lentils?”

He nods, trying to look confident as she squints at him. “Ah,” he says, remembering something the herbalist would have suggested. “If the discomfort continues, you must eat half a raw onion with soft rice and drink hot water with lemon, honey and cardamom. Do not drink any coffee until the pain is gone,” he says, and adds, with some embarrassment, “and especially not raki or other alcohols.”

The woman gives him with a skewering look, but he cannot tell if her indignation is over his suggestion that she would ever touch the stuff, or that he would tell her to avoid it.

“Please,” he says, “I can only say what I think. You should find a real doctor.”

She nods and thanks him, still with that strange frown—a look of puzzlement, and resignation, he thinks, but to resignation what? She does not offer him money or food, as most do not, but as she leaves, she pauses by the door.

“I have lived in Beyoğlu for many years,” she says, “and it is a city of noise and pain, but that should not make your noise or pain any smaller. You must learn to open your mouth,” she says, “and shout.”

Winter settles into Beyoğlu, and though the buildings in the heart of the city shield him from

the bitter cold of the county, the cold fills his room, unstirred and murky in the shadows beyond his lamp. The winter air is dryer here, too, and cracks the skin on his hands so that they sting when he washes them. In the country, one washed before bed and before entering the temple, but now he finds himself washing before meals, washing before prayer, washing before dissection, though he's not touched the body yet, washing before all lectures, washing before touring rounds, washing before sleep, washing before meals, and around again, until the skin on his hands and wrists wears away in the endless, feverish prayer of scrubbing.

The day they are to learn the structure of the muscles of the upper torso, the presenting student is the Greek, who stumbles late into the anatomy hall with watery eyes and dripping nose. The others shift as he passes, wary. Though the other students avoid Adnan, they do so out of oversight—during the initial sizing up, they simply took note of his accent, his previous studies, and his bewildering statement that no, he'd come to the university in accordance with Allah's will. After that, their gazes slid past him without even a blink.

Their antagonism towards this Greek student, however, is an active, living thing—petty things like whispered slurs and splashed ink, mislaid notes, snickers and insults when he asks a question. None of them is careless enough to openly attack him and risk their position at the university, but the thick tension that fills the hushed rooms and echoing halls seems to amplify any slight to the proportion of violence.

Adnan is surprised by how much it irks him that this student, who must have known what it would be like as the only Greek student in the midst of eighteen Turks, would act so oblivious to his disadvantage. His smile, the dumb grin of a panting dog, stays fixed no matter what's whispered just behind his ear and instead of studying harder, practicing until he knows the body with such a fluency that he can answer any of the surgeon's questions before the rest of them can open their mouths, he

seems to take none of it seriously—not the demanding studies, or their sneering prejudice, or their opportunity to be here.

The Greek student sets his notes next to the body, rumpling his papers and painstakingly straightening them, and they stand awkwardly as the silence turns to granite around them. On the other side of the body, Adnan struggles to appear perfectly still and attentive while he shifts and readjusts his weight, fighting the tightness and ache in his back and shoulders.

Since they began this dissection, he has become more and more aware of the elasticity and limits of his own body—the precision of the skin that stretches over his elbows and knuckles, the plane of his hips canting forward as he hunches over his book, the stiff deadweight that grows in his back muscles as the hours climb past midnight, the finite length of his arms swinging the same perfect circle around him each morning, the weight of his own skull against the floor. It is a new sense he mostly enjoys, but on mornings like this, his awareness of pain seems to echo in his emptiness.

The Greek student sniffs, a loud, wet sound, and begins to peel the muscles away, his tentative cuts stalling completely when he has to search for the words. *Serratus anterior*, Adnan recites in his mind. The Greek stops several times to turn and clear his nose into his handkerchief, and Adnan sees the other students smirk at his honking, but the surgeon shows no sign of pity and his glares become sharper at each stutter and pause.

Finally, the student loses his bearings completely and, staring at the woven mass of fibrous muscle, declares the *rectus abdominis* to be the *radialis oblique*. A surprised laugh echoes through the group and the surgeon claps his hands, stopping the student open-mouthed, still holding a length of muscle in his fist.

“I am not sure what to make of your explanation of anatomy,” the surgeon says, “but in case your fellow scholars only read as much as you seem to, I feel I must correct you.”

He gazes at the shriveled cadaver for a moment with an expression that comes close to disgust, then looks up, across the body, and motions for Adnan to come closer. When he does the surgeon seizes his arm and uses him to demonstrate his explanation of the abdominal muscles, his fingers tracing along Adnan's ribs, down his stomach as he lifts Adnan's arm, twisting his torso at the waist to show the other students how the muscles stretch. Adnan's breath hisses out from between his teeth at this sudden searing movement in his back, but the surgeon doesn't seem to hear, and keeps twisting him until he can see the red-eyed Greek over the surgeon's shoulders, a tired, nerve-stripped boy just like himself, just like they all are. When he sees Adnan's grimace, he smiles at him, a droopy smile with only half of his mouth, but there is pity there, or understanding, and Adnan quickly looks away to the cadaver's blossoming chest, each layer of skin and muscle flayed back and tacked to the wooden table the way one could pin the wings of an insect open to preserve its shape as it dries.

The surgeon lets him go as abruptly as he took hold of him, and Adnan thinks, *this is the first time someone has touched me for more than a year.*

He sees the woman again when he is called out one night, as usual, to the kitchen to tend to a man who cannot turn his head. The trouble began after a particularly straining day of work at the docks, but Adnan knows nothing of neck muscles or the stacked rings of bone that make it stand upright and twist, and so he pleads his ignorance to the man and tells him he must find a real doctor, before the damage becomes irreparable.

The old woman watching this sighs and leans forward to suggest a hot poultice of certain herbs, easily found, to soften and loosen the cords of the neck, followed by a layer of cold river clay to draw out the heat.

"The damage is only temporary," she says. "You've made your neck twist one way for too

long. But this will let you return to work earlier.”

Adnan expects the man to scoff at her words, or ignore them and wait for Adnan to respond, but instead he nods, and thanks her, and his wife helps him to his feet. Neither of them looks at Adnan as they leave, and he in turn stares at the old woman.

“I’m sorry,” she says finally. “Please do not think I was false to you during all this time.”

“What should I think then?” he says.

“I brought these people to you, and you helped them. Where is the harm?”

“Helped them? All this time, I was only fumbling in the dark, thinking they had no one else but me, even if I knew next to nothing. But you all along, knowing—”

“Knowing what?” she grumbles, though her tone is more sheepish than truly irritated. “I only wanted to compare what you learned in that big university with what I could have taught you.”

“What, no apprentice, no child, to test your knowledge on? You have to trick a stranger into it?”

“I had both a child and an apprentice,” she says, her mouth suddenly bent into a strange smile. “My son. But he was killed by the Sultan’s militia last year.”

“I am sorry. Surely we each belong to Allah and to Him return,” Adnan says, a reflex, then realizes her words, “He was killed by the army? Fighting with the Janissaries?”

She looks at him for a moment, waiting for his face to change or his eyes to look away, then says, “With the Janissaries, yes, but given no chance to fight. He was only a yerliyya in a nearby village, a better healer than soldier, but it was a peaceful time. And then one morning, I find a young man on my step waiting to tell me. They had been friends, I think. He had been with him, he said, he saw my son swept across the street in the mob but he could not even tell me where to find his body. There was nothing left, though many men were killed—and by whom, the Sultan’s militia?” She spits to the side, and the look on her face startles him. “They say the Sultan’s men incited the

violence, but the villagers broke their bones and faces with their own hands, these men who had served them for years. The Sultan manipulated his people so that his own hands would stay clean.”

“No, the Janissaries marched on the palace first, here, in this city.”

The woman’s voice rises over his, cutting him off. “They were ambushed and they did not even know they were at war.”

“But they rejected Allah, they rejected the Prophet’s standard, and attacked—”

“And yet before your birth, the same reason, this excuse of blasphemy, was used to execute the Sultan then.” She shakes her head. “Do not rely on piety for everything. Devotion to Allah can be bent into any form.”

Adnan closes his eyes and breathes in deeply, trying to imagine his own mother leaving for the market one morning and finding another militia member waiting for her under the hazel tree by the road, carrying a look of regret.

“I am ignorant of many things, I am sorry,” he says after a long silence. “I wish there was something I could do to help your loss.”

The woman waves her hand, a ‘nothing, nothing’ gesture.

“You can help an old woman by healing her body. That is something you can do. Wherever your father is, may Allah watch over him and one day return him to his mosque so he may see his son healing the devout.”

A pause, and Adnan asks tentatively if changing her diet had helped the pain. The look she gives him sends heat into his face, but she holds up her hand.

“The pain is still there, and many nights it keeps me awake. Your advice helped, truly, but I cannot eat only yogurt until I die.”

“I don’t know what to do. I do not know enough, I can only do harm with my ignorance.”

“Have you even been to Bergama?”

He shakes his head, confused at this unexpected question.

“It is a small town on the cliffs above the coast. When we were still the land of Pergamum, still the conquest of the Greeks, there was a temple there to the god of healing called the Asclepion. A river ran beside it, sacred healing water, and those who came to be healed could bathe in it, and if the water and the priests did not heal them, they were sent into the tunnel beneath the river at dusk to sleep with the sound of the water rushing over them, dripping down the stone walls, and in their dreams, the gods would whisper the name of their ailment, and the method of cure.”

“You blaspheme,” Adnan says, a reflex, but if she is surprised by his vehemence, she does not show it.

“Perhaps. Some believe the cure is whispered by spirits of those who suffered and now sort through the earth looking for those with an identical pain.”

“You speak like a pagan.”

“Why? Do you not believe Allah would only give pain if he also could give the cure? Perhaps the ancients simply did not know our truth, and Allah answered them in spite of it.”

“I do not think you understand what you are speaking of.”

“How painless it must be to allow Allah to direct your thinking for you. How easy,” she says, then shrugs and lurches to her feet. “Well, I was never in training to become a mullah, it is true. I was never in training to become a doctor, either.” She pats his arm and moves to the door. “But even so, perhaps I’ll be given my answer.”

A month passes in a roar of noise, Beyoğlu shouting him awake each morning, lulling him to sleep when he can hold no more words in his mind and lies in his bed like a body made of sand.

The woman still brings people to his door, but she guides him now, teaching him what questions to ask, what sounds to listen for—the sharp breath in when his fingers probe a swollen

joint, the soft grating sound of bone scraping bone in a clean break, the wail of an infant with colic, more pitiful and reedy than an infant with a blocked intestine. He refuses to help those wanting cures for troubles not physical, but watches her mix the dried leaves and roots for a drink to bring youth, a charm to bring love, a pouch to catch the bad luck that floats in the city's thick air. He reminds these people that Allah alone holds the power of their lives in his hands, and tells them to give their money at the mosque instead, and each time they smile and nod, thank him for his advice, and take the pagan charms anyway. The woman says nothing to his disapproval, but as she includes no ingredients aside from plants he recognizes from his village herbalist, he decides to let the disagreement pass silently between them.

When the surgeon assigns portions of the inner body for presentation, Adnan volunteers for the stomach and entrails. Several of the other students turn to frown at him, and the Greek student, who now seems to always appear at his elbow, listening for Adnan's whispered answers the way a sparrow waits for dropped crumbs, gives him a puzzled look, but the surgeon only smiles his arrogant smile and nods.

He spends the weeks before that day in study, memorizing the drawings in his book, every line and scratch and shadow. He wonders how different the man's withered organs will appear, and whether it is due to natural variation or the talent of the anatomy artist.

The old woman knocks on his door the night before he is to present, bringing not another patient but a small jar of balm, thick and scented, made of goat's milk and compressed olive oil. He tries to turn it away, thanking her for her generosity, but she says it is not generosity, and is not only from her.

"We have all seen your hands at the table, hands placed on more than half of us without any

payment. We want you to care for yourself too.”

He does not refuse again, and she watches him spread it across his hands, both of them wincing when he touches the bloody patches of raw skin.

And then the time comes for Adnan’s dissection of the *Viscus*, or the plural, *viscera*. An organ formed like a pouch, or a tube. The heavy Latin words feel like river stones on his tongue when he begins, but he finds they come like the prayer he chants five times a day, the jolt and lull of their sounds falling into familiar rhythm. He carefully lifts the stomach away from the surrounding organs, explaining the nature of its skin—watertight, capable of stretching to more than twice its resting size when filled, feeding the body through long ropes of intestine. As he cuts the stomach open to show the wrinkled texture of the membrane inside, he finds several bulging growths attached near the upper opening, and for half a delirious moment, he thinks the man swallowed a string of dried onion bulbs before he died.

“Ah,” the surgeon says, “here is the reason, one of many, he is in our hands.”

He tells them how the growths would have obstructed food entering the stomach, how they would cause pain if the man ate anything but the yogurt and soft fruit, how eventually they would have stretched the stomach membrane past the point of accommodation, rupturing it and killing him if the lack of nutrients hadn’t done it first. The surgeon instructs Adnan to cut into the largest growth, nearly the size of a fig, and he hesitates, begging forgiveness in his head before he does. He expects the ripe-looking growth to burst under the blade, but its tough rind pushes back against the knife, making it difficult to halve. He steps back as the others crowd around him, his blood draining into his feet and nausea swirling in his gut. The Greek student, watching his face blanch, reaches over an open hand, offering to take the blade for him, a gesture that any other time would have made Adnan laugh.

“What could we have done to help this man?” the surgeon asks. “Where would we have started?”

The other students begin suggesting brewed remedies, massages, small, exploratory incisions.

The surgeon nods and agrees, treating the growths would be a difficult task, but reminds them the first step is to discover whether the growths exist, and where.

“First, we must ask about the patient’s pain. And no matter what they tell us, we must listen.”

“But really,” Adnan asks, ignoring the surprised look the others give him. “With something like this, what could we do? You cannot just cut open a living person’s stomach.”

“If you had attempted everything else,” the surgeon says, and shakes his head. “A small cut, with a careful hand. Boiled cloth, a length of catgut to stitch the wound and tie the stem of the growths before you remove them. But one should only ever cut when he is sure it will do less harm than good, because harm is always a certain result.”

He presses the surgeon for other, less drastic treatments, taking careful notes and at the end, he slips the knife into his sleeve, pretending not to see the alarmed look the Greek student gives him, that last phrase a drip echoing in his mind. *Less harm than good. Less harm than good.*

And when he knocks at the woman’s door that night, nervous to be on the women’s side of their boarding house, she answers the door with a face that says she knows he has found his answer, and, he thinks, she is afraid.

“Adnan,” she says, and he barely has time to recognize his own name in her mouth before he rushes to tell her what he found inside the man’s stomach, showing her the stolen blade and describing the symptoms that match hers, the ways to be sure and the way to cure her illness. When he runs out of breath, he realizes he’s been gesturing with the knife the whole time, swiping and jabbing as if he would cut the air too, and the woman has not looked away from the blade once.

He holds it out to her, hands flat, until finally she reaches out and takes it, giving him the smallest nod.

“I leave tomorrow for Bergama,” she says, “to go beneath the river. Come with me, and after, if you still believe this is the answer, I will accept it.” She raises her hand, cutting off his protest. “Please. It is a day’s journey, and a little more, but I am an old woman and ill.”

He wonders, later that night as he prepares to leave with her, what his father would say if he were told about his son participating in pagan rituals. He wonders with what voice he might hear in the tunnel— the sound of a prophet, the fire and breath of god? The ageless voice of children, unanchored souls returned to their first pure state? He thinks about the blasphemy of visiting this place, but it worries him less than he would have expected only a month ago. Instead, what keeps him from sleeping even past the time when the city outside has settled into her quiet purr, is the worry that he will not hear the voice of Allah, nor the words of a pagan god, nor the whisper of spirits, but only the sound of his own thoughts, echoing back to him from the dripping stone walls.

We are all here

The day Andi had decided to finally call about the radiator, it stops. Tomorrow, she'd said, if it hasn't stopped banging by tomorrow morning, I'll call. I'll tell them it's the twelfth thing that's been acting up here, the twelfth very necessary thing, I've been keeping count, and I don't want to wait two weeks for them to come fix it, I just need to find somewhere else to live.

She'd put off calling a few times, even practiced what she would say while she washed the dishes, muttering to herself walking around the house, carefully peeling away her cuticles. It's just *completely* unprofessional, *completely* unacceptable, how do you expect someone to live with that ticking, that smell like a rotting, how could I live here—

But then some days it was nice to have that noise in the house. It was regular, and almost familiar.

And now it's normal again—no slow, measured knocking sound, the sulfur smell gone so completely she wonders if she imagined it. Surely the smell hadn't been that bad, my headaches were probably from something else. *It probably is something everyone's radiator does at the beginning of winter*, she thinks, *and I just never knew*. The thought of all those Northerners, millions of them, suffering through badly behaved radiators at the beginning of every winter made her feel suddenly connected, like she could go out to a bar or café and strike up a conversation by commiserating with any stranger there about their terrible radiators.

It really isn't so bad, she reminds herself, it's better than being stuck on the Island, the same ancient run-down city where she'd grown up, with salt-crusting cars and plaster walls swollen with humidity, just waiting around like all the losers she'd gone to high school with. The apartment is trying! And that, she decides, is what should matter.

You can change, I will help you, she says, then laughs a little at her silliness, patting the carved wood trim around the doorframe. We're all changing here. We will be all right. It's going to be fine!

Her mom would have loved the apartment's strange ticks though. She would have walked around humming, orchestrating all of the weird taps and knocks and echoes into some sort of music, pretending the place was some sort of metronome.

When Andi was little and she had to wait at the high school while her mom caught up on paperwork, she liked to go into the music room where her mom taught and set the long shelf of metronomes ticking. A game, see, to get them to all going the same speed, so the whole room would vibrate, ticking in unison like a some giant bird's heart. She would spend hours running up and down the shelf, fiddling with weights, resetting pace, looking for the ones that didn't match with her eyes unfocused. Sometimes her mom would come in and watch her, or laugh and clap, jumping in to help, putting one ticker off track in the finished section and then pretending innocence when Andi found it.

She'd only gotten all the metronomes perfectly matched a few times, when her mom had helped her. There was a video of it, of course—little Andi in front of this seething metronome wall, grinning while the heavy tin *clack clack clack* covered everything she said.

Stuff like that had been so weirdly important to her mom—she hadn't worried about them taking care of themselves once they were old enough, never made a big deal of exercise or grades, but she got so worked up about having a meal all together once a day, about making holidays and special occasions a big deal, always getting out the video camera and recording it. She could remember how her mom had so carefully saved up points at the grocery store, even buying things like sugary cereal and grapes out of season, and when they'd gotten it, months away from any

birthdays or big holidays, she'd made Andi and her older brother, Matt, invite kids from their school over for a pizza party, just so she could record them having fun. After that, she'd taken the camera everywhere for years, taping all the time right up until she'd gotten sick.

They'd found crates and crates of little videocassettes when they cleaned out their mom's things. Matt hadn't wanted them, he'd taken one look at the pile of tapes and said it would kill him to sort through and watch them all. So Andi was going to make it his Christmas gift—bring him a box of the videos, some really good ones with him and their mom, just a shoebox full, not an overwhelming amount, and he would be so touched, and she would still have most of the videos for herself to watch whenever she wanted to.

So now she spends almost every night in her apartment, getting high and watching these old home movies, feeling almost like she's procrastinating, even though no one here expects anything of her outside of work.

Instead of the superintendent, she calls Matt, and he picks up and says no, it isn't a bad time even though it's early, but she can hear the TV on in the background, the way he's talking on autopilot. *Can't you focus for a second?* she wants to say. *I'm your sister, your only family now, and you're goofing off.*

Instead she asks about his work, how his wife is, what the weather is like. It feels strange to make small talk with her brother, but in the eight months since she'd moved away, she's realized they were never that close.

They'd always lived in the same city, even after he and their dad had moved out. He loved the Island, but she'd always thought she couldn't wait to move away, go live in a huge city. She'd never gotten around to leaving, though—she'd lived at home to save money, then gotten a good job at the big beach resort right out of college, one that left her bone-tired and sun-dazzled each day. And then

she'd dated that girl for almost a year—her first serious relationship, but it had been a mistake after all, like her mom had warned her, and when it was over, the girl took most of their friends in the breakup somehow, when Andi hadn't even thought there would be sides to take. And then her mom had gotten sick and it'd been up to Andi to keep up with bills and drive her to the doctor and watch stupid romantic blockbusters with her at night, trying to forget the whole thing was just a countdown as they watched her wither away.

After their mom died, Matt urged her to start applying for jobs and internships, start looking for a career now that she had some money to move, now that she didn't have a reason not to move. And she'd ended up here, working in her brightly lit office and doing well. She'd helped boost sales in her department in just the first quarter, her boss said she was a quick learner, and she had this apartment, and everything should have been just fine.

Just think, she says. It's not even Christmas yet, and it's already snowed more times than I can count.

Wow, he says, voice absent and flat. She can't blame him, she complains about it all the time.

Oh, she says. I keep forgetting to ask—what are you guys doing for the holidays?

He hesitates. Well, you know Valerie's parents have been planning this trip to Italy for a while, and they already bought everyone's tickets, a while ago. We didn't know what you were planning, but I don't want you to be alone for this— well, this first Christmas, so I guess we could probably see about staying here if you were gonna come and visit.

A space of silence, round and delicate as a bubble. She wonders if he's even trying to not sound disappointed.

Or, I guess we could even ask her parents if it'd be alright if you came, look into—

Oh no, don't do that, she says, bright and flippant. I don't think I'll get more than a couple of days off, and I can't really afford to fly. You guys will have fun, I bet Italy's real pretty in the winter.

That's what I hear, he says, and before he hangs up, he jokes that her homework to do before she calls him next is to get out and try something new.

This is a little unfair, she thinks later as she leaves for work. She *has* tried. She went to community yoga at the coffeehouse downtown four times, even though she secretly hates yoga, hates the serene smarminess of it, hates all those weird poses that leaves everyone's butts up in the air while they are supposedly concentrating on the steady rhythm of their breathing. She took a portrait drawing art class at a community center, something she never would have done back home. She goes out with a group of coworkers every time they invite her, no matter how tired she is, even though these women are much older, already rooted in their lives, with husbands, some with kids, hobbies outside of their jobs. They have the type of effortless sophistication that she knows comes from years of practice and, well, yes, also from money, but they aren't gaudy or showy or condescending—they are just very kind.

Dave, the man whose desk is across from her at the office, asks if she's excited to get home for the holidays and see the sun.

Oh, no, I think I'll actually stay here. I probably wouldn't have enough time off work to drive all the way down there, and I don't really like to fly. Too scary. Too expensive.

You know Boss-lady would probably let you take some work home with you, he says. Give you some more time with your folks. You should ask her.

She smiles and says, That's okay. I'm not such a fan of Christmas anyways. Too stressful. It'll be nice to have a few days to myself.

He frowns a little at this, but shrugs and says he can see how that might be.

She's started this habit of lingering in the bathtub, listening to the rumble of the water pipes above and around her, while the water bleeds from hot back to tepid. If she waits long enough, the women next door come home from their jobs together, cheerily slamming the front door, striding in, their heavy, careless steps thumping across the wood floor. She imagines them flipping lights on, bright, then bright, then bright as they make their way across the living room, around the twisting hall, through the little closet kitchen into the bathroom that shares a wall with hers, moving quickly through the mirrored version of her apartment.

She smears a hand across her forehead, water dripping into her eyes.

Hello, she wants to rap out onto that separating wall. *Hello*, all knuckle and loose fist, *are you there?*

She should try to make friends with them. They aren't like the women in her office, they seem solid and serious and clearly don't care about fashion, but they seem happy, and successful, and they are together. Maybe she could learn to be more like them.

We are all here, aren't we, she could knock, and maybe they would answer.

Hello? We are all are living this place together, right?

But of course they wouldn't answer, wouldn't understand the question—how could they? They would whisper and giggle together about it, tell their friends at the bar they go to every Thursday night about the weird girl in the next apartment who tapped out strange rhythms on the wall.

The video she watches that night is labeled "NOV 01-FEB 02," and she makes herself a cup of instant cocoa before she turns it on. It's mostly short bits—little Andi holding up paper bags on Black Friday and smugly listing all the deals they had gotten. Little Andi grinning up at the camera, too young to be self-conscious, huddled on their favorite bench out on the seawall and holding her

special hot cocoa thermos. Little Andi, too short in a crowd, pouting because she can't see the Dickens' Caroling Troupe for the fat tourist family in the way.

It's okay, honey, her mom's voice floats through the mess of surrounding noise, I'll tape for you and we'll watch it again tonight.

The camera's eye swoops up to zoom drunkenly across the heads of the tourists and catches a bright velvet cape, the lamplight on the soprano's white fox muff, a too-shiny top hat, before finally steadying and taking in the caroling group as a whole.

Winter on the island always seemed like a novelty, the whole season compressed into a two-month span filled with holidays and traditions, when things like drinking hot tea and wearing a scarf everywhere and shivering in the car before it warmed up were more a game than practical things, as if everyone was mimicking what they saw on movies. Even now this video gives a sort of acted-out sense, a brightness the cold here in Chicago could never have when it seeps into the fibers of her clothes and sticks in her hair and hurts her teeth when she breathes.

She lets the tape play to the end, and somewhere in the middle of their Christmas morning, the tape catches and becomes to a scrolling static screen, blinking like an eye, their past selves barely visible behind the steady *blip blip blip* of the skipping tape.

She shakes herself awake, and turns it off, and wonders how long she's been lying there staring at it.

The homeless man who turns in small circles and sometimes cries softly to himself looks up and sees her walking by on her way to the office. She is always careful to not look away too quickly, to keep eye contact and offer him a brief, sympathetic smile. He'd been someone's son once, she reminds herself, might still be. Maybe someone missed him.

But this morning, he shouts, loud and hoarse, that she is beautiful, *so beautiful, just like, like the*

cat on the cat food commercial! He starts singing a wordless waltz-like song, and grabs at her hands, kicking his feet up like someone dancing on Broadway. She dodges away from him, knocks into a trashcan and stumbles into the street just as the light changes. She dashes across into the crowd of people from the other side, laughing uncontrollably, while the man shouts after her.

And this morning, the sky is a blazing, eye-hurt blue and the cold sunlight on the river dazzles and the world seems to spin faster than usual.

If you feel more alive and terrified and brilliant than ever before in your life, she thinks, and no one is around to see it, are you still—

The people at work are giddy about the holidays. Some of them are going to cabins to ski, some of them are just having big dinners at their parent's houses, a huge gathering of all the sons and daughters and grandchildren. Her boss is going to Cozumel, and can't stop talking about getting a tan. Dave must have told people she hates Christmas, because no one asks what she'll be doing. Or maybe they think the holidays remind her of her mom. Maybe they just don't think to ask at all.

It's probably better, she thinks, it'd be awkward if they realized I didn't have anywhere to go.

That night the women that live in the next apartment play piano for hours, though imagining how they got it up the twisted wooden steps, polished fragile with use, is a puzzle. She recognizes the opening strands of *Moonlight Sonata* and imagines the couple next door sitting on the bench together, each playing a half, giggling at each other's missed notes and stretched chords.

It was her favorite song growing up—just last month she'd come across a video of her mom setting the camera down on the mantle and letting it run—probably Andi didn't even know she was recording. In it she is—what, eight or nine?—and lying on the linoleum floor in a ripped silky nightgown, fanning herself with a magazine while her mom sits at the piano. When she asks Andi to

pick a song, she picks *Moonlight Sonata*, of course.

Oh honey, her mom says. That's so melancholy. Why do you only like the sad songs?

Little Andi whine-mumbles something, but doesn't get up, and her mom wheels off into some jumpy scherzo, then a bright show tune, a dumb polka, just to irritate her, and they both laugh, but when her mom stops and says she'll play *Moonlight* if Andi will come sit next to her and learn the right hand part, Andi howls, *noooooooooo mom I told you, I don't want to learn!*

Andi, her mom says, her face frowning and stern, You know I won't always be around to play the piano for you, and then what will you do?

And while Andi shrieks *I don't care!*, her mom looks up into the camera, and smiles, and winks.

And there, years and years later, Andi jerks back in her chair, stumbles up, heart slamming and slaps the power button off.

What the fuck, she asks the house. What the fuck am I supposed to—

It was a joke, it had always been their joke. They'd had that conversation a hundred times before that video was made, and they kept having it, but there, sitting alone in the pooled lamplight, her mom's dopey, joke and her stupid, child self had turned into this other reality, a terrible story about a little girl who never listened to her mother and finally had to pay when—

She never had changed her mind about learning, and her mother stopped trying as she got older. It had seemed so important, this avoidance of learning piano, just like she had been so ready to get out and live somewhere else, but now for the life of her she can't remember what the point was.

In the silence after the music next door stops, and the women are probably crawling into bed together, Andi hears her kitchen faucet start to drip. It isn't the occasional dribbling like before, the surprised sound of someone spitting out hot tea, but more like the second hand on a clock, a

regular, truncated *tunk. tunk. tunk.*

She doesn't go check—she knows she turned it completely off. She feels she shouldn't go into that room, for some reason.

She calls Matt, instead, but he doesn't pick up. *It's not that late*, she thinks. Maybe he's somewhere out with Valerie, at a bar or the theatre, pretending to always have been rich and elegant. Maybe they're on the beach, she thinks, and imagines the way the water smells at that moment, rushing toward them out of the dark to sweep across their ankles, sand shifting under their feet, keeping them just a little bit dizzy and off balance, keeping the world moving and exhilarating. Not frozen and watching and waiting, like here.

This is ridiculous, she says out loud. I need to fix this myself. She looks up at the ceiling, and realizes as she does that she almost expected it to look different, but even in the dim light it's only her normal high ceiling, expressionless white plaster.

I can fix this myself, she says again. But she can't go into that room, not tonight.

On her way out one night that week, her boss walks by her one bright cubicle in the darkening office, and pats her shoulder and says, Keep up the good work, Andi.

Keep up the good work. It sounds like something you would say to someone whose work wasn't good or keeping up, and you didn't know how to tell them. Some days she can't help it—she has the creeping sensation that she isn't actually good at her job, that she's been acting a charade all this time and everyone is just now starting to realize it.

Jesus, she thinks. *What is with me? I'm good at this. I am.*

But it isn't just work, she thinks. The feeling comes whether she's sitting at her desk or in her armchair in front of the TV, or even sometimes walking home. That she's slowly tipping backward, one inch more every hour, but not to hit the ground in a solid, final way, but sinking in water,

lukewarm, bitter and choking in her nostrils, falling back into some long, unguessable depth.

The women from her office invite her out, for the first time in more than a month, and of course she goes along, careful to not seem too eager, to a tiny Iranian place where they push together three of the ten tables and order big plates of baba ghanouj and tabouleh and kofta to share. They all seem so easy with each other that Andi wonders if maybe they do this more than she'd thought and just hardly invite her. Maybe she gave a stand-offish vibe. Maybe she would have to be friendlier, more fun.

So when the dinner is over, and quiet comes over the table as they wait for the checks, Andi says why don't they come back to her apartment? She has a new comedy downloaded, and they can smoke some weed with her. At first, the women giggle a little, laughing like indulgent moms, but then they realize she was serious, and laugh harder. It turns out none of the women has ever been high before.

Can you believe that? they say, not a single one of us?

Unexpectedly, they each make "don't wait up for me" calls and follow her home, oohing and ahing at her old brick building, the tall windows that remind them of a cathedral. One of them turns the radio to a jazz station, and instantly, the apartment is warm and relaxed, beaming at them. Andi can't believe she'd never thought to turn the radio on to jazz before.

She shows them how to hold the pipe and hold the smoke, pressing it down into their lungs with the inhale. The women are impressed—Andi, you're so crazy, you seem so quiet, we could never tell, they say. They get giddier, giggling at their own thoughts, laughing harder when they realize they can't explain them. Andi laughs so hard her chest hurts, her lungs seizing and burning, and she hopes her face doesn't look the way it feels, like a snarl of half-unraveled thread.

And then they go home, kissing her cheeks like Europeans and thanking her, some still

snickering to themselves at imagined jokes, Andi turns on a tape her mom made when she was in middle school. She can smile now, at her greasy hair and terrible clothes, and roll her eyes when she complains to her mom about bitchy girls at school—it's funny now, she isn't like that anymore, she's changed and even the things that hurt so much back then are okay. She feels proud of herself for asking the women over, risking the awkwardness to become their friend, and she lets herself imagine that they'll do this every week.

For the next few days, she looks at her phone, over and over, something she hardly does, but not one of the women text her or call her. She starts to realize they won't, that if she called them, they would be busy, they would apologize and say yes, maybe next time, but it wouldn't happen. It'd been a one-time thing for them, a joke, a racy anecdote to tell at their parties, a funny story about this funny girl.

She keeps checking her phone until Dave smiles and asks, *expecting your boyfriend to call?* He doesn't mean it in a snarky way and he doesn't know better, but the way he smiles, his older, indulgent tone, like it's only normal, makes her throat hurt.

She worries her coworkers can see she isn't sleeping well, that they're afraid to trust her with responsibility, even though she's not letting it affect her work.

Now I've done it, she tells the apartment at three in the morning, speaking loud enough to worry, just a little, that she'll wake up the women next door. Now I've fucked up my sleep rhythm for good.

Smoking doesn't help much, and the Benadryl she took a few nights ago only made her feel stumbly and stupid, and she'd ended up circling her apartment over and over with one hand on the wall, trying to make sure it was her balance that kept shifting, not the floor and walls around her. It

hadn't completely worn off by the next morning, and she'd to struggle not to yell every time it felt like the L was tipping off its tracks.

But strangely, before this year she'd always hated needing to sleep. She was fascinated by nocturnal people who slept in the daylight hours and worked or gamed or did whatever at night. Surely those people know things we don't, to give up the normal world so easily.

In high school, she'd flirted with amphetamines for a while, taking Adderall for studying first, then just for fun, loving the way the nights were so different from the days and the heady buzz she got, a skull full of diligent bees, and how in just the space of a night, she could read a whole book on rabies or practice a whole set of Chinese characters or become an expert on old Bruce Lee films, just in those eight hours she would usually lose. Even after her mom found out and made her quit, she still tried to sleep a maximum of four hours a night, less if she could. You actually need sleep, her mom kept arguing, it's not something you can just opt out of, there's a real reason for it.

Yes, that's right, she remembers, staring from her chair into the dim hallway that led to her bedroom. When she was a kid, she thought maybe there was something in the dark that could only come out when it couldn't be seen, something necessary, but something no one really wanted to admit was there. And once you saw it— if you saw it— well. You needed sleep so you wouldn't have to see it.

That night she takes her dinner into the living room, as usual, and decides that even if she won't see Matt and Valerie for Christmas, she should still mail his box of tapes.

I need to take this seriously. I'm all he has now too. We need to actually work on being family.

She cringes to think how selfish she's been—not just recently, but even when their mom was still alive, she'd been so cold to him. Of course, he didn't have a lot of time then, and he did call, he

did come by when he could, and even so, she had acted so ungrateful to him, so suspicious, making snarky comments about him being a guest, about his visits being so *special*, making it clear he was an outsider, that she was the one doing all the hard stuff, the real work of taking care of their mom.

But it was awful to see him dressed in nice doctor's clothes, bringing their takeout and flowers or expensive chocolates from the old-timey candy store on the Strand—all the useless, expensive gestures she didn't have the money or the energy for. She'd watch him sweep into the living room and yank the blinds up and the TV off, watch him be so adult and so encouraging and think, *is it really that easy? Could I ever be that good to her too?*

And he had tried to help her too. *She loves to have you around so much*, he'd say *but she doesn't need a constant babysitter. Go out, see your friends.* Or, after her mom started getting worse, and then much worse, he'd tell her, *You should get nights off, too*, rubbing her back. *Just call me, I'll come over and be with her.*

But she never did. Not the nights they knelt in front of the toilet for hours, or the nights she drove to the E.R. at four a.m., her mom shivering in a bundle of blankets next to her, and not the very last time she'd been admitted to the hospital. Even after they'd said her mom wouldn't leave this time, she'd put off calling Matt until almost too late. She had been so careful to never say *Matt, help, Matt, come over, Matt, we need you*, and for what? What had been the point?

She puts in a video labeled “07--Spring Break, Sailboat Tour, Mattie's BDay,” and settles down to eat. The video has a short few shots of herself on the beach with her mom, and long shots of them on the deck of this tilting boat with the wind whipping their hair across their faces and into their open, smiling mouths, just as the sun is sinking into the bay.

When it gets to Matt's birthday, Andi laughs to see her and her mom, standing in front of Andi's laptop, waiting for Matt to pick up their Skype call. Only her mom would use a laptop for a

Skype call but record it by setting up the old video camera behind them. When Matt answers, they launch into their purposefully terrible Happy Birthday, and after a couple of minutes, Andi watches her younger self say she's off to Julie's, remembering with a jolt the girl she spent most of senior year infatuated with.

As soon as the door closes, Andi's mom begins quizzing Matt about Andi's "new lesbian thing," then realizing too late Andi hasn't told Matt. Andi shakes her head and thinks, *Why would I have?*

They argue over whether it's just a phase—Matt calls the whole thing a ploy for more attention, her mom declares it's be her dad's fault for being such an egotistical asshole. It was strange to watch, uncomfortable—her mom had seemed to take it all in stride, she was so *cool* about it, her friends said, that Andi would never have imagined she actually would say these things. She probably forgot the tape was running.

Finally Matt says, Whatever, I'm sure Andi will be fine.

I know, I know, her mom says. I just wish she wasn't so drastic about everything. Everything she does is this huge life-altering ordeal, and I have enough to deal with already.

Did you hear back from the doctors?

Her mom nods. It wasn't bad news, but it's gonna be rough for a little bit.

Andi stops eating and leans forward. *Wait, she already knew she was sick then?*

Her mom laughs, a mad little snort. God, Mattie, just don't let her drop out of college or do anything really drastic if I die, okay? I'm gonna hold off for as long as I can, to keep some normalcy.

You haven't told her? She hasn't even *noticed* something's wrong?

Of course she hasn't noticed, she's seventeen. She's in high school, she's apparently in love. All she can see is her own life and her own friends and college applications. Her mom shrugs and gives a sad smile. It's how she should be right now.

You still should tell her, it's not like knowing you're sick will just freeze her life.

No, you know, Mattie, you *know* that as soon as I tell her it'll just become her whole life. She'll want to follow me around every second—it'll be this big production of taking care of me, of how *devoted*—

Andi reaches over and turns off the TV, the *crk-whrr* of the little cassette in player suddenly loud in thick silence. She thinks for a minute she might throw up, or cry, but after a moment of trying, the ache it just sticks in her throat. She picks up the camera, yanks out the cords and throws it, but changes her mind mid-swing so that it flops out of her hands and rattles across the wooden floor, loud, too loud, and she scrambles after it, snatching it up, finally sobbing, stupid, hoarse noises that sound more like the ravings of some lunatic than actual pain.

When she can finally stop, and the apartment is silent again, she hears a clicking sound—the sink, she knows, or maybe the radiator again, but for a second she pretends it's one of the women from next door, tapping on the shared wall in the bathroom, *are you alright in there, come over and*—

But it's a beetle, a bright brass-colored bug that's woken from it's hibernation and somehow gotten into the apartment, flying around and around her bedroom light, smacking its hard shell against the glass again and again, trying to get into the brightness inside.

—*tap tap tap*. Like the water dripping into the stainless steel sink. Or a watch, ticking slower and slower, the seconds stretching longer as the battery dies. Or— or what?

She carefully pulls a blanket off of her bed, never looking away from the bug's drunken flight, and closes the door behind her. Great, another room I shouldn't go in.

But she probably wouldn't have been able to sleep anyways.

That night is the same walk home, the same dutiful stomp-stomp-stomp up three flights of

stairs, the same deep breath and pause at the top of the stairwell, but when she sees the women next door coming down the hall from the opposite direction, she walks past her own door and waves to them.

Hi, I'm Andi. I live next door. I always meant to say hi when I moved in.

The taller one smiles, automatically friendly, and Andi sees the shorter one sizing her up—hair cropped to collar length, one side buzzed short, shiny black brogues with weathered laces and cuffed jeans, and the woman's expression shifts to approving and she introduces herself, Tabby, and her partner, Kelly, then invites her in. They show her the apartment, which Andi thinks is hilarious, since it's the same exactly layout as hers, but she keeps her face eager and friendly, and they give her tea and tell her all about their jobs—the shorter in social work, finding jobs for 'women in transition,' the taller in environmental advocacy. And they get along, *hit it off*, Andi imagines her mom would have said. She wonders, as the light coming through the window leaks away, and they've poured more hot water into her mug, if they'll ask her to stay for dinner, and she tries to think of a way to accept without seeming like she expected it.

It's so funny you came by, Tabby is saying, we were just wondering last night who lived in the one over from us.

Yeah, we couldn't remember if we'd ever seen you or not, Kelly adds, and immediately looks stricken. Oh, no, sorry I don't mean we wouldn't remember you if we saw you, it's just that we didn't know—

Ah, no it's okay. Andi laughs, waving her hand in the air, a gesture stolen from one of the office women. It's fine, we have different work schedules. And I haven't seen y'all before this really.

They nod, and Kelly asks, do you play the drums?

What? No, I don't play anything actually. Why?

Oh, never mind, we just had a bet about whether you were a musician or not, since we can

always hear you the little drumbeats you tap out on the walls and pipes.

Hmm? Andi says, careful to look curious, confused. Oh, no, that's my radiator. It's always making this knocking sound, like there's a little windup toy stuck in the pipes or something. It's cute, I think. Sorry if it bothers you.

She takes a drink, and the women nod, smiling, but don't say anything, and in the silence that follows, she looks up and asks, well, doesn't your apartment make noises like that?

Later, when Matt finally picks up and she tells him the women next door thought the noise was all her, he misunderstands.

Andi, if you hate the place that much, why don't you just move?

I don't hate it, she says. Why do you think I hate it?

You're always complaining about how things don't work, and I mean, I want to keep in touch, but if it's just about your radiator knocking or bugs getting in, I really don't have time for that.

In the silence, she imagines the connection between their phones is almost visible, a bright, shining electric charge thickening the air, arching across the hundreds and hundreds of miles back to home. She wants to tell him she's losing her balance, slowly tipping backwards, but he is waiting for a point to her call. He's waiting for a reason not to hang up.

A few days ago, she says, when I was walking home from work, it was already dark, right? And it can be pretty creepy—there's a stretch where it's just shops that are closed for the night and on the other side is a big empty park. So I'm walking, and I hear this weird humming noise, a little motor, and it's this massive guy on an electric wheelchair, just ten feet back. And I walk pretty fast, but he stays right behind me, and the faster I walk, the closer he gets. And I think, what if he's not really paralyzed? What if he's going to jump off and run up behind me?

She laughs. And I know it's stupid, but then I started imagining how easy it would be to mug

people and murder them, if you rode around in a wheelchair, because no one would ever suspect you. God, it was so scary! The whole time I was just holding onto my keys, waiting for him to come charging up behind me, but I didn't start running, even when I had a head start on him, because I was afraid I would hurt his feelings. How stupid is that? I didn't want to hurt his feelings, even though he might kill me.

Jesus, Andi, Matt says, and he actually sounds mad. What is wrong with you? That guy was disabled, he was probably just going home too.

I know, that's not what I meant. It was more like, just, what if? You know, if he wasn't actually disabled, or what if he was something else—

What, like a monster? Look, is this just more cries for attention? Because if you needed someone to hold your hand, you shouldn't have been so quick to run off like you did.

You asshole, she whispers. I'm all you have.

Matt says again *I don't have time for this*, and hangs up.

Maybe that's what the nocturnal people know, she thinks. We really are all alone in the end.

That night, she smells the radiator before she hears it—a quick whiff of sulphur, as if someone has struck a match in the other room, and then the quiet knocking begins, like someone counting off their steps in a dance or a piece of music.

Two days before Christmas, the L comes to a grinding stop in the dark, and everyone groans. Probably someone's jumped on the tracks. That's what everyone always thinks when this happens—they always assume it's bad, and Andi hears a woman say, Another one? Really?

It's this city, the man next to her says. It'll just get to you after a while. And so close to Christmas—

Andi notices a man across the aisle from her, headphones in his ears, staring at the overhead ads like it's their fault the train is stopped. He is mouthing something, and at first she thinks it's *no no no no no*.

Maybe he's late, she thinks. Late for something really important—

And then he whisper-shouts YES! and jabs his fist in the air a little, and she realizes he's listening to the football game. He was saying *go go go go go* all along, something that snags in her memory—something her mom would have said, just like that, repeating that staccato little word as she cheered Andi on.

And when she gets home, the apartment is alive, the noise of the radiator and the dripping sinks and deep percussion of the water pipes mixing with the sounds of other people walking above her, the whole place a clattering orchestra, and the air is thick with the stench of rotting eggs. She shuts the door behind her, unsure what else to do, and thinks of opening a window, but it is so cold inside already, and she can't find fresh air, even lying flat on the bare floor, and she can feel one of the starburst headaches she gets from the radiator smell beginning to build inside her skull and she stands and stumbles toward the door.

Outside, Tabby from next door is standing in front of her own door, arms full of groceries and digging for her own key.

Hey, she says, automatic, then frowns at Andi's face. You okay there?

Huh? Oh yeah, I'm fine.

You look kind of upset. Her face changes, from a confused concern to a flat, professional suspicion. Everything all right in there? she asks.

In my apartment?

Yeah, you look like you were... trying to get away from someone.

Oh. Oh! Yeah, I just needed some air.

You just needed some air, Tabby says. She's dropped her key completely now, and walked to Andi's door. It dawns on her that this woman, a social worker, probably hears other women say things like that a lot.

Yeah, it's that apartment. You know. The radiator and all. And actually, I live by myself.

You do? This the first real surprise the woman has shown. Wait, just by yourself?

Just me. Only ever just me.

Tabby smiles and smooths the confusion out of her face. Oh, we thought someone else lived there! We wanted to have you over for dinner ages ago, but we thought... Well, never mind. What's wrong with your radiator?

You know, the smells. Sometimes it's really bad. The noise doesn't bother me as much.

The smells? What kind of smells?

Andi shrugs. Maybe these women weren't actually Northerners either, she thought.

Do you mind—the woman pauses. Can I take a look?

Tabby follows her into the cloud of thick, rotten air and immediately claps a hand over her nose and mouth.

Andi, that isn't your radiator. That's a gas leak.

A what?

Your gas, you know. One of your pipes must have a leak or something. God, I can't believe we can't smell this in our apartment.

Oh. It does that sometimes.

Andi, that's bad. They have to come check this out, you can't live here with that.

I can't? She says this, her dumb friendly smile still in place. I mean, it's bad enough to leave?

Yeah, you shouldn't be here if there's a gas leak. You should call and get someone out here

tomorrow.

Tomorrow's Sunday.

Tabby stares at her. And Monday's Christmas Eve.

They look at each other for a moment, and Tabby asks slowly, You have somewhere to go?

Um. She stops herself before she can nod and say *oh yeah, I'll figure it out*. If I tell her the truth, she thinks, she will ask me to come stay with them, and I will finally know someone in this goddamned city.

But she shakes her head. Actually, I was planning to leave tomorrow to go home. I can probably just leave tonight.

Tabby frowns at her. You know there's a storm blowing in, right?

Well, yeah, but I'm driving pretty much straight south, so if I'm just careful for an hour, it'll be fine. Andi smiles at her, certain now. It'll be fine. I'll be back home by tomorrow then, call the guy for the gas, and everything will be fixed by the time I come back.

But if you aren't used to driving in snow it can be really dangerous. Even without ice, it's easy to lose the road in the dark, or fall asleep. You can get road hypnosis.

I'll be fine, really.

I don't know, Andi, she starts to say, but Andi is already thanking her and turning away into the apartment to pack.

Now as the sunset leaks away from the carpeting storm clouds, Andi can understand why Tabby would be so worried about someone who wasn't used to weather like this. The snow is the dry, gritty type that doesn't stick or pack into snowballs, the consistency of desert sand, flooding across the road in waves.

She keeps one hand on the wheel, the other between her knees, alternating to keep her fingers

warm until she can't stand it, and flips the heater on. Just for a second, she thinks, one minute of it on high so I can thaw my fingers, and I'll turn it off before I get warm and sleepy.

The heater begins to click, a strange, broken whirr. She forgot it did that. Another reason only to have it on for a minute, before it gets mesmerizing, like a hypnotist counting down from ten, before she can start to imagine his swinging watch, ticking back and forth until—

She shakes her head. *Focus. Focus.*

The snow wrinkles across the road in waves, and watching it, she thinks of the heat and grit of the beach, shrieking and running through the waves with her brother. When she was little, her mom had made up a game, *wave chasers*, where she would stand on one of the piled-slate piers and send them racing through the incoming tide, running parallel to the beach, and whoever could go the fastest and straightest won the prize. It was hard to run straight while the waves swept past, hiding the ground.

For a while it was her favorite beach game, one she could finally beat Matt at since it took speed *and* concentration, and then her mom had gotten that camera, so of course she started recording the races too, replaying it after dinner to show them who had run straighter, and when she got into middle school, it was how her mom had convinced her to join the track team, reminding her of their silly races. Andi had watched one of those tapes just last month, where they are seven and ten, racing side by side through the sea, and as she thinks of the back of her seven year old self galloping away, pulling ahead, it comes right back—the flat, hard heat of the sun on her skin, the way the water washed across her shins one way, pushing her towards the beach as the sand shifted under her, pulling her out to sea and she loved it, running full tilt, hurdling the little crests that tipped across the top of the tide and foamed around her legs as she let her vision blur, going into a trance, just her pumping legs and the warm, sleepy heat of the sun as she sped straight through the waves, outpacing her brother, passing and speeding up, grinning huge and gasping air as her mom

cheered her on, so happy, her voice carrying loud across the lengthening space, go Andi, go, keep straight, faster, go go go.

An open door, an empty room

Light from the distant front washes through the dark, moving in waves against the grimy clouds. It seems impossible that here, nearly ten miles from the Saint-Quentin Canal and the western front, Jennings could still see these quick, faint flashes, and he smiles to himself as he waits outside the crowded field hospital, thinking how well he's learned to ignore the shells, the muscles of his stomach and thighs no longer tensing at each soft rumble or burst of light.

He thinks of writing this in his next letter to Sarah, and wonders how to phrase it—with the wrong wording, it could sound ominous or macabre, almost like giving up. It's been nearly two weeks since his unit was sent back from the front to the reserve line, and though it's true, the coming spring and their distance from the static, ringing clamor of the front have helped raised spirits all around, it feels as if a numbness from the winter mud that sucks at his boots has seeped into his mind as well.

Their reserve trench was German first, just south of the Somme—well built but for the fact it faces the wrong direction, and only slightly less putrid than the front line's current trenches. The air inside is the consistency of silt, and the only virtue of the stubborn cold is it keeps the stench to a low note.

He could never have dreamed up this hell, and just like all the men he knows, he fantasizes about the end of the war, about rest and silence and warm sun on fields that are flat and green instead of torn gaping. But recently, even though he's tried to stop it, he's begun to think more and more of what would happen if he didn't return home, but went somewhere else.

He thinks, as he does too often, about the story of his grandfather's friend who disappeared during the Civil War, presumed dead until he was found, decades later, on a cattle ranch in Texas, with a new name and a new life, and he closes his eyes against the thought. This war will be over

soon, and everything will go back to normal, and he will return home, after this war has scraped him clean of the previous summer and his clinging guilt, his sadness, shaping him into what he should have been all along. He only dreads returning because it's impossible to imagine now, after learning what it's like to wake with the acrid yellow air of the trenches in his nostrils, of sitting alone all night in the mud that fills the ragged trenches like pus in a wound.

“Here for your broken idealism then, Jennings?”

He looks up and smiles at Danny Fraser standing over him, holding out his box of Grey's, one already between his lips. Jennings ducks under his grin and takes the cigarette, watching Fraser strike a match, then bow in mock gallantry to light Jennings' cigarette. He marvels at how smooth his movements can be with one arm limp at his side, the joint swollen straight with infection.

Jennings had held the lamp two weeks before when Fraser, coming back from a disastrous night patrol, had gulped a plug of gin and tried to dig out the shrapnel buried around his elbow with a jackknife. It had eventually taken three of Fraser's tent mates holding him down while a fourth pinched and probed the skin, but he'd refused to report to the field hospital.

“That crazy sheik they have in there is just as likely hack my arm off as stitch me up,” he'd said. “God knows how he got to be our doctor, but I'll take my chances, no one ever died from a couple of splinters.”

“I think he's from India, actually,” Jennings had said.

“What's that?”

“You know, India. They don't have sheiks there, you're thinking of Arabia.” Jennings thought for a second, as the men around them began to snicker. “Persia. Turkey, maybe.”

Fraser had given him a look, half anger, half hilarity, his eyes glassy with the pain and the gin. “I don't care if he's the Saladin, Ali Baba, or a mermaid from Atlantis, he's a goddamn certifiable

nutcase and I don't want him anywhere near me. You saw him, you know what I'm talking about."

Jennings had never known anyone to be fond of doctors or medicine in general, either at home or out here, but he understood Fraser's aversion to this specific man. They had first met the doctor on the front, during one of the long sieges where they were sent over the top to inch their way through no-man's land, ducking and scrambling and trying to ignore the men dropping right and left of them. They couldn't advance and expect to hold it, not with those losses, and the two companies sent out first straggled back in, only a fifth of them unharmed, and just minutes after Jennings' unit had been sent over the whistle came again, calling retreat. The men crowded against the ladders cheered and caught the retreating men as they scrambled over the side, then stood, waiting, dropping their stiff shoulders and unclenching their jaws.

His first flush of relief from the retreat drained away quickly, leaving an itching restlessness, the dregs of his adrenaline scraping through his veins still as he turned and looked at Fraser, at the men standing behind him, unbuckling their helmet straps and swiping muddy hands across their necks. He could see how glad they were too, and of course they were, of course he was, but also disappointed, ashamed at their happiness—after all, the thing that kept them alive instead of ripped into tatters was luck and a matter of minutes. He'd come here for a reason, hadn't he, come here to—

He shook his head and crouched down with the rest of them when ordered, leaning against the slimy wall of the trench to wait, until shouting from farther down the trench made them all turn.

A tall, gangly man wearing the white medic's armband was shouting at four stretcher bearers who stood facing him but were slowly backing away, shaking their heads. Jennings could see the tall man wore a different uniform from the other four, and he watched as a pair of them carefully set down their wooden stretcher and walk away, followed by a third who dropped his end quickly and jogged after them.

“They’ll be court-martialed for that,” Fraser shouted into his ear over the screech of incoming shells, and he turned to see his whole company gaping at the scene. “It’s a wonder he doesn’t draw on them now, threaten them with it at least. That’s desertion in the line of battle, no two ways about it.”

Jennings nodded, watching the doctor confer with Greyson, their officer, shouting and waving in large, jerking movements until Greyson held up a hand to silence him, and turned toward the men waiting at the walls.

“Shit,” Fraser hissed, barely audible in the space of silence before another explosion, closer this time.

Before Greyson reached them, though, Jennings was on his feet, straightening and rebuckling his helmet, unshouldering his rifle to lean it against the clay walls.

“Hold on, what are you doing? Stop it, he’s going to make you—” another shell burst across the rest of what Fraser said, but then he was up, coming to stand beside Jennings, cursing soundlessly as he lay his gun down too. Greyson nodded at them, pleased, believing volunteers made him look good, and waved them toward the doctor.

“They’ll be yours for the night, until you get as many in as you can.”

The doctor barely looked at them, and didn’t even attempt to shout over the sound of the shells, only jabbed a finger at the stretchers on the ground and jerked his chin towards the ladder before tearing up it himself.

It hadn’t seemed possible for the noise of the battlefield to grow any larger, but over the lip of the trench, the snap of gunfire and percussive thud of shells slammed against them with as much force as sound. Jennings felt every crash bloom in his sternum, shuddering into the rest of his body, and as he stumbled after Fraser, nearly crawling they were so low to the ground, he tried to stop thinking about what it would feel like to disappear in one of those fireballs, his body blooming and

shattering in an instant.

The first man they came to was dead, most of his upper torso blown away, so that his head and neck were flung up and to left of where they should have been, only attached by one thin wing of collarbone. His stomach flinched, turning over, and he saw Fraser turn to spit globs of bile. The doctor felt around the man's throat for his tags, ripping them from his chain, then moved on without saying anything.

They found a second, a third, a fourth—all dead, but the fifth man lay gasping in shallow hole, his eyes squinting as though concentrating on the sky above their heads, hands clutching the hole in his stomach—he took a breath, and thought, *finally, surely that's manageable.*

He helped strap the man to the stretcher as the doctor gave instructions to the other man, his original stretcher-bearer, and motioning for Fraser to take the other end, sent them back to the trench. Jennings glanced once over his shoulder as Fraser stumbled away with the other man, then followed the doctor farther into the smoky haze.

Another dead, his chest broken in and a look of wonder on his face, and then the next and the next and the next, on and on, crawling through the smoke and noise over tangles of men still warm, until one was not dead. He knelt beside the doctor where he was wiping away the gash in this man's upper thigh, wishing he could hold a light for him to see, but the doctor sloshed out the disinfectant and wrapped the bandage so quickly, so precisely, he didn't need one. Jennings moved to strap the man's legs to the foot of the board, and found his hands didn't shake, his movements quick and sure, and when the doctor nodded at him, a quick dip of the head showing he'd noticed as well, Jennings' pleasure at the recognition surprised him.

The doctor, they heard later when describing that night, had the reputation of a madman—skilled, yes, but raging and cocksure as any Mad Jack officer, and so a couple of nights later when Jennings tripped and fell onto a jagged plank in the duckboards and ripped open the soft skin of his

inner thigh, he also only pulled the splinters out himself and doused the puncture in gin, then tried his best to ignore how the blood pooled in his boot, squelching with each step, turning his sock into a thick, sticky skin that never completely dried. But it had mostly healed by the time they were sent into reserve, now just leaking small amounts of clear pus through the greenish, puffy tear. Instead, his captain had sent him to medical for his simmering fever, dizzy nausea, and lymph nodes swollen to chestnuts, since the threat of Spanish flu had made everyone nervous.

“You gave it a good try, though,” Jennings says now.

“What’s that?” Fraser asks, frowning as he lights his own cigarette.

“You’re here, finally, for your arm. I said you gave it a good try in toughing it out.”

“Ah,” he nods. “Sarge says I get it fixed by Friday or he’ll cut it off himself.”

“Friday? Why then?”

“Fifth army up at the front says they nabbed a couple of jerry deserters in hysterics about a new offensive set to start then. Doesn’t sound bad enough we’ll go right off, but no one here ever knows piss about things before they happen.”

Jennings doesn’t answer, and Fraser drops a hand onto his shoulder, gives it something between a pat and a shove, and walks away.

In some ways, it had been a relief to join up and come to France. He’d driven all the way to Massachusetts to enlist, so his family name meant nothing in his unit. He liked being Jennings, another soldier like the man to his left and the man to his right. No one even suspected him of anything worse than being rich and spoiled, and he shared their same call to duty. He knew this time would be the most important of his life, and though he was disgusted to think how he’d imagined the battlefield to be noble, there was peace in knowing the courage he showed here would outweigh everything he’s done before.

Here, it was easy to read letters from his fiancé, to only hear her words spoken his own reading voice. Here, it was easy to be in the company of men and talk about sweethearts and wives, compare pictures and notes, and sometimes talk also of the European women who followed the army camps or the village widows and daughters who kept a lantern lit in their farmhouse window all night. With their constant presence in conversation and thoughts, their memory used as charms or protecting spirits, the absence of the women became a tangible thing, their empty space just as full and soft to the touch as their physical selves.

But for Jennings, it allowed women—his fiancé, his mother, the girls in town who used to toss him glances over their shoulders, everyone but his sister Sarah—to become a comfortably abstract idea, a subject he'd read enough about in books that he could join the conversation, a realization that brought only a twinge of guilt.

“Jennings!”

The nurse shouting above the din is the motherly sort, round and smooth-faced beneath her wilting cap. He struggles to his feet, folding his paper into his sleeve, as she leads him through the maze of bed rows, his eyes watering at the haze inside the tent, the sharp, vinegar air of disinfectant barely covering the thicker stench of pus and gangrene and piss beneath. The nurse touches a curtain that sections off a whole large corner of the tent.

“Doctor Khannan,” she calls, her drawl making it sound like *cannon*. “Doctor?”

A cough. A gravelly voice. “Yes, come. We’re just finished,” and Jennings realizes that never once in that awful night did he hear the man speak.

She holds the curtain aside, but lets it fall behind him and doesn’t follow him in. Relief, always the relief, as if he was holding his breath in her presence.

The doctor nods at him, and turns back to the patient seated on a high table, a young private

buttoning his jacket who looks for all the world as if he lied about his age to enlist. Jennings watches the doctor, a thin man with dark-eyes staring out of a stretched, haggard face, reach and touch the boy's arm, holding his elbow for a long moment, a gesture of—

Of what? For a moment he remembers Wesley's tug on the back of his sleeve, how he would slip two fingers into the crook of his elbow and run them down to his wrist, pinching the soft bare skin at his shirt cuff, smiling at him sideways.

There was a private in their platoon, a boy really, who in their first days in the trench had seemed to float through the filthy maze, dazed and vaguely cheerful, until the first night barrage. None of them had really known what it would be like, even though the exhausted British soldiers they joined talked again and again of the horrors of trench shelling, of modern weaponry. They'd been sent to the front immediately, fresh blood for the trenches, and one night of that first week as they were all crouched in the mud, cowering under the shells, this dazed boy suddenly jumped to his feet, shrieking and thrashing, and made a run for the wall. They'd watched Greyson and a man named Shaw grab him by the ankles and belt as he tried to claw his way up the sandbags. Greyson had shoved him into the other man's arm with a look of disgust on his face before moving down the line, but Shaw just held onto the boy, pinning his arms while he flailed, his screams becoming thicker, hoarse, until he eventually turned his face into Shaw's chest and sobbed, no longer fighting to be free.

It was strangely freeing, Jennings thought, like watching that boy had loosened something in them all, his raw animal terror becoming the embodiment of the fear they'd all been trying to gulp down, and now that it was let out, expressed, they could breathe again.

The boy lost his dazedness that night, and in the following weeks, threw himself into his tasks, repairing walls and duckboards, digging latrines without a word, subdued but calmer. Fraser, who shared a tent with Shaw and two others from back home, told Jennings that now the boy sometimes

crept into their tent to sleep next to Shaw on the narrow cot, that he sometimes woke early and saw the boy's head on Shaw's shoulder, the older man's arm curled across his back. Fraser described this with his usual ferrety smirk, but what surprised Jennings was the lack of real malice in his voice. No one treated Shaw any differently now, as far as Jennings could tell, and the boy became something of a mascot, some of the men ruffling his hair or patting his shoulder as they passed in the narrow trenches.

Because he was so young, Jennings thought, and Shaw the age of his father. Because it was the right sort of love, the kind of bond soldiers needed to stay sane and fighting in conditions like these.

The doctor—*Khannan*, Jennings reminds himself—releases the soldier's arm and sends him out, then turns from his papers to face him. Jennings waits first for him to speak, but Khannan only motions for him to be seated on the edge of the high table the younger soldier just left. He does, flushing slightly at the way the moisture-thick wood groans beneath his weight, and he waits, wiping his sweating palms on his sleeves, watching Khannan meticulously disinfect and dry each of his instruments. Up close, in this dim space carefully shut away from the rest of the bustling tent, the man's energy seems more a quiet, closely kept tension, different from his wildness before.

When Khannan finally does turn and speak to Jennings, he asks what he's there for, what symptoms he's felt, without recognition or introduction.

"Fever," Jennings says, "headaches, swollen lymph nodes beneath my jaw and in my throat. Slight pain in my thigh from the wound, but I'd expect that."

His correct use of terminology makes Khannan raise his eyebrows and nod before asking more questions. It's strange to hear that voice, with its deep timbre and precise accent, coming from this dark, scarecrow man, and Jennings thinks of a play he saw once at university, where a spirit, a *dybbuk*, spoke in a rasping voice from deep in the throats of those he possessed.

He answers, no in a clear voice, no pain in his legs, no coughing, though when Khannan asks

about pain in his genitals, he blushes and stammers no, no it couldn't possibly be that.

"Is that so?" the doctor says. "Tell me the secret to your health, then, that I may share it with your comrades."

He shrugs, thankful for the dim light. "No secret, I just don't join them in places where they get those, those diseases. But good luck convincing them to stop."

"I see." The doctor studies him for a moment. "Any other symptoms you can think of?"

Feeling like an impostor waiting to be revealed, Jennings thinks, an anxiousness hanging over me, as if I've been given an order, then forgot what it was.

But he shakes his head and says "No, nothing."

Khannan frowns, thinking, and in the silence that follows, Jennings asks, "How is it you're here?" before he can think of how it sounds.

The doctor looks at him, a slight smirk on his face. "As they say, when the little queen walks forward, she pulls her royal train after her."

"No, I mean, as our doctor. You know, I, well I guess it seems a lot of the men wouldn't stand for it usually."

Khannan stills, his face rigid now. "Well you'll have to apologize to them on my behalf. I was not given much of a choice in the matter either. I am on loan to this company until they finish training the new field doctor. Apparently you Americans haven't much of concept of battle medicine."

"I'm sorry. That isn't fair."

The doctor frowns at him. "Half the men serving under British command did not choose to be there. Do you know what a draft is? How else do you think someone from the darker parts of the empire come to be serving here, stitching up the pride of the army and sending them back to the front?"

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I didn’t—I didn’t know, I didn’t think.”

Khannan ignores this and moves forward to where he sits. He places cold fingers against his quivering pulse, lingering on the hard knots nested beneath his jaw, then gently prods the nape of his neck, the stiff nodes strung there like beads. He murmurs notes to himself in that rich voice and Jennings allows him to slip a thermometer beneath his tongue, unbuttoning his jacket and shirt to the waist so the doctor can listen to his lungs. Khannan picks up a small mirror, two fingers still resting beneath Jennings’ jaw.

“Open your mouth,” he says, and when Jennings does, he slips a tin spoon into his mouth and presses down his tongue, saying “*Wider*,” forcing his jaw farther down.

Jennings chokes, coughs, then apologizes in a whisper, not looking up, explaining it hurts to stretch his jaw that far. The doctor’s face remains still, but he sets down the spoon and begins to massage the muscles at the back of Jennings’ neck. His fingers move to beneath his jaw, stroking the tense cords in his throat, the stiffness that reaches to his temples, and Jennings closes his eyes as the man peers into his mouth, using the mirror to reflect the little light in the tent. He concentrates on those smooth fingers pressed against his bulging lymph nodes, trying to ignore the warm breath on his skin, trying to think of something, anything, but this tall man standing between his knees, his face so close they nearly bump heads.

A hand, warm, flat against his chest. The voice, from somewhere close: “Breathe in for me. In. Right, now breathe out. Good. Now again.” He’s too close. Jennings feels light-headed, a slow draining of awareness— *stop*, he thinks, *please stop*.

“Are you alright?” the doctor asks and Jennings nods, still not opening his eyes, so that when Khannan’s wrist brushes against his erection, he jumps, bites his tongue and flails out for balance, grabbing hold of the doctor’s arm, fingers digging into the rosy muscle. Khannan wrenches his arm away and moves back out of reach.

“Careful there.”

“No,” Jennings says, quickly, too quickly. He swallows. “No it’s— I’m alright. I was only surprised.” His face, his neck, even his scalp burn, and he can’t meet the man’s eyes.

A hand slides once, twice against his thigh, and when Jennings remains carefully still, Khannan grips him, hard, through his trousers.

“Keep quiet now,” he says, gravelly voice a whisper.

The hand moves, slowly, and Khannan steps close, bumping Jennings’ knees farther apart, and he feels a sound, some embarrassing moan, growing in his throat. He drops his head and presses his mouth against Khannan’s shoulder, but again the man jerks away and he has to catch himself from falling forward.

“Keep still,” he says again, no expression in his voice. “Keep still, and do not touch me.”

Jennings nods and covers his mouth with his hand as he watches the doctor’s hand pull his zipper down and slip inside, his touch a shock. Khannan places his other hand flat against Jennings’ chest, bracing him back against the canvas of the tent, putting himself out of reach. His hand is rough and dry, gripping, pulling hard, and somehow the discomfort, even the pain, so unlike what he’s experienced before, adds to the urgency, the tightness in his belly, the fullness in his brain as the warm air in the tent buzzes like fly-swarm, and it is not even a minute before he is gasping, whispering *I’m sorry, sorry* and taking the rag the doctor hands him, which he realizes, as his awareness slowly returns, is the same rag Khannan used moments before to clean his tools.

The doctor’s anger surprises him, even though he’d known about the draft, though he’d read about how England had started bringing in troops from Asia and Africa. Joining the army had been his own choice. It meant putting his studies on hold, but after that summer where everything had changed, he thought it would be the only way he could stand in front of his father again and expect

to be seen. His mother had tried to talk him out of it, his fiancé too—*Oh Evan, just wait a bit*, they said. *The war is nearly done, and we have so many troops over there already, there's no need for more.*

But Sarah had come to see him at school one day, after hearing of it from their parents. They'd gone to lunch at the Pate-a-Choux, a little imitation French cafe he'd told her of in his letters, and he sat across from her and watched the ease with which she slipped off her gloves and folded them into her pocketbook, then traced the etching on her tea cup with a fingernail. She always seemed so comfortable, as herself, and he felt sometimes she was the older one instead.

Her steadiness is what saved him that morning the previous summer, when his father had burst into his room and struck him, hard, across the face. He was holding a letter, and though Evan would never find out who had sent it, he knew instantly what it said. Their shouting had brought his sister, and she'd tried to calm their father as he railed about how soft he'd always been on Evan, how he would be changing schools immediately, how he would be effectively cut out of the estate, out of the family, until he showed proof of changing, of becoming a real man, a normal member of society. When his father, guessing somehow, had grabbed the translucent shell—a Sunset Tellin, Evan knows now—in his windowsill, his sister's voice had stayed calm when his broke—*No*, they'd both said, together, but he'd covered his mouth against the gasp in his throat, and she'd gone on, calm. *No*, she said, *there's no need for that, I gave that to him, don't break it, you don't see shell that fragile very often, please*, and he'd watched his sister's poised face crumple and sag at the frail crunch, and realized then that she knew, she had always known.

"Are you really thinking of joining up?" she asked when they began eating. "You know father could keep you out of it. It would be easy."

"What, and further convince him what a worthless sap I am? No, I think I've mortified him enough." She winced at this, and he coughed, hating the sad look she gave him. "Anyway, beyond that, I don't want to buy my way out of this war when other men my age, younger, are going over

and dying.”

“Nicely put,” she murmured. “But it’s not as if we need more boys sent over. It’s not as if there’s a *draft*. It’s noble to keep things running at home as well.”

“I can’t do that. I don’t have more to offer than any of them do, I don’t deserve to be the one here more than any of our men over there.”

“I see.” She paused, swallowed some tea, and went on. “Now, when you keep saying ‘our men’, the men over there, are you talking about the average American soldier? Or do you really mean Wesley?”

No one had spoken that name to him now for nearly a year, and he hated himself for the way it dropped straight into his stomach, how the muscles in his legs tensed and his hands suddenly needed something to occupy them, a reason for movement.

“What?” he said, his voice a croak, and he cleared his throat and went on. “Wesley joined? How do you know? Is he over there now?”

“I didn’t know whether I should tell you or not, whether you would want to know even. But then I thought of you hearing it from someone else, someone who didn’t know, didn’t understand...” Here, she looked away, her gaze dropping to her empty plate. “Well, what he meant to you. I don’t know how he is, or where even, but I heard from a girlfriend of his brother’s classmate that he shipped out two months ago. She only mentioned it in passing, and I couldn’t really interrogate her further.”

He swallowed. “Thank you. I didn’t know, you were right. I wouldn’t have thought he’d join up.”

“You wouldn’t see him, probably. Please don’t think of joining on his behalf.”

“No, no, I wouldn’t. Don’t worry, I really am past all of that now. Wes—” He stopped, sick just at saying the name. “Lily. Lily and I are very happy, you know. Of course, I wish we had ended

differently. He was a good friend. But I can't help that now. Wes— he's made his own choices in this. He made them, and I made them, and—there's nothing more to be done."

Sarah was silent through all this, listening. When he'd trailed off, she waited a moment, then said, "You know, if it isn't for him, and if it isn't some misguided sense of noble self-sacrifice, I think going over might be something that would help you."

"Help me?"

"Well, of course I hate to think of you in danger. We all do. But you wouldn't have to go as a soldier, would you? Surely they need, clerks, or, or, I don't know, map-readers? Educated men. And when it's over, it can't last much longer, there will be people needed to stay and rebuild, perhaps. And you might do well to get far away for a bit, away from Father and the estate. Away from your studies even, from all these people you know. If you went, you would have to become someone entirely different than you've ever been, wouldn't you? Doing things you've never done. You could be, I don't know what I'm really saying, but couldn't you feel at peace like that?"

And he had stared at her, hearing sense in her words. Going away, doing something noble, something large to mark over all the mistakes of his past.

He can't even laugh now, when he thinks of this conversation, just feels a dull, throbbing hatred for how stupid, how so, so sheltered they were, two little royals sitting and talking of the nobility and purpose of war. How it could *help* him.

When he had first repeated some of this reasoning to Fraser, sometime during that first week in France, the man had stared at him, exclaiming at the idea that he somehow thought this would be a *vacation* of sorts, his hooting laughter edged with a sort of incredulous anger. With three younger sisters and a mother all working, Fraser had joined up in hopes it would pay more than the temporary factory work he'd been getting back in England, at the start of the war before anyone

knew how long it would last, before anyone could have ever imagined what it would really be like.

When they arrived at the front, stationed near Saint-Quentin in a trench gleefully dubbed “This Way Out” by the British soldiers there, when Jennings and the other fresh Americans finally saw the reality of the trenches and the lice and horrid, creeping gas attacks, the limbs that sometimes appeared out of the mud in heavy rain, Jennings knew Fraser and the others watched him closely, delighted to see him itching and retching and jumping out of his skins at shells. But he found he didn’t mind their jeering—he knew his terror and disillusionment, thrown large against his ridiculous expectations, justified their own fears, and in a way, their derision soothed him, the way a long-dreaded punishment becomes a release when it finally appears.

That night he doesn’t go back to his billets—the doctor gives him aspirin, and a glass of warm salt water to gargle for his throat, and assigns him a cot far back in a quiet corner of the hospital. Khannan explains he’s reasonably sure it isn’t trench fever, or the flu, but that he’s required to quarantine and observe possible cases overnight. Jennings can’t believe how calmly he says this, while his own ears are still ringing. It’s hard to look at the doctor’s face, expressionless, with only the faintest sheen of sweat, as the same wild-eyed man from the front, sprinting from body to body and tearing bandages with his teeth. Jennings wonders if perhaps the situation isn’t as strange as he feels, then shakes his head. *Surely he can’t be doing that with all of us*, he thinks, and almost laughs to imagine Fraser’s righteous Cockney outrage in the same situation, shouting obscenities, his red face merging into red hair. The thought stills him—once again that feeling of everyone around him knowing more than they let on, of something about him, no matter how careful he was, giving him away.

He’d managed to ignore that part of himself almost completely, until the summer after his first year at university. He and Wesley had gone, together, to a friend’s beachfront estate for a wedding—

they had both been groomsmen in the ceremony, standing for their friend from primary school. It was a lovely place, large enough to house the wedding party and many of the groom's friends from school for the entire weekend, and the whole thing had been extravagant, the groom's party arriving nearly a week early to drink and play racquetball on the beach and billiards when it was too dark to swim. Evan had gotten carried away with the relaxed atmosphere, and allowed Wesley to monopolize him—following him to the card table when called, sitting next to him at each meal, accepting all the ridiculously-named cocktails Wesley made up on the spot. He hadn't noticed the smirks and whispered asides, or perhaps hadn't let himself notice. These people were their friends, had jokingly called he and Wesley "the fork and knife pair," "the matched set," "the comedy duo" for years.

After the ceremony, he had barely eaten anything when Wesley pinched his elbow, rubbing the cloth of his jacket between his fingers, and said they should take their drinks out to the beach. Evan turned to look at him, at his profile outlined sharp against the darkened windows, and felt a giddy, queasy feeling in his stomach. He kept his own face serious to avoid aping Wesley's smile, and opened his mouth to answer before deciding it was better to say nothing, and let Wesley interpret his silence however he liked.

He always felt like such a coward in these moments, whenever he was certain, just for a second, that the slow grin or murmured innuendo or hand pressed against his back was for him, the way he wanted it to be, but always immediately he began to doubt. He would stay instinctually frozen, still as a rabbit in the long grass, until the moment passed with a horrid mixture of relief and regret.

But that night, the moment didn't pass. Wesley kept hold of his sleeve until, during the next toast between courses, he stood and whispered for Evan to follow him to the foyer in just a moment. Evan watched the bride blush under everyone's expectant gaze as the groom pressed his

lips to her temple, and something about her smile—so triumphant, so *assured*—sent a thrill of hatred, bracing as a stiff drink, straight through his stomach. He slipped out to find Wesley, and they left with their drinks and, somehow, a pocket bottle of bourbon Evan had never tried.

They scuffed along the beach in bare feet for a while, not really talking, just sharing the bourbon and loosening more and more of their formal attire until Wesley had taken off his cuffs, collar and tie and crammed them into his pockets, and Evan had taken his jacket off altogether and was holding it by one shoulder, dragging it behind him like a reluctant child. Every few yards, they picked up pieces of shale or driftwood and lobbed them hard as they could back into the black water, Evan laughing a little too much when Wesley held up a piece of driftwood with three eerily twisted limbs, pitched his voice into a whine and begged, *please sir, I've worked so hard to get ashore, I want to be a real girl! Please, I'll do anything, anything.*

Wesley stumbled, and laughed, and sat down in the sand, flopping onto his back when Evan sat beside him. Evan was glad they had walked so far from the open ballroom, the hundred electric lamps blaring across the sand. He could feel his cheeks flushing a deep, uncomfortable red, from both the bourbon and the eager nervousness that hummed through him. They said nothing for five minutes, maybe more, only finished the bottle in silence, Evan raking his fingers in the sand while Wesley hummed a little and sighed and finally reached out and said, “Give me your hand.”

“What? Why?”

“Just give it here,” and when he did, a sharp, small pain bloomed in his palm and he gasped and yanked it back.

“What the hell was that?”

Wesley grinned and held up a shell he'd found, hinged open like a moth. “Look, isn't it pretty? It's so delicate but the edge is quite sharp.”

“Yes I see that, you idiot, you could have just shown me.” Evan said, examining the shallow

cut. It was barely bleeding, but the pain was so surprising that it seemed larger, shutting out the beach and Wesley and the sounds of the distant party, until Wesley started laughing.

“What now?”

“I’m sorry, I found this shell and thought, oh I don’t know, I thought I’d cut your hand and then cut mine and we’d be blood brothers or something ridiculous, only now I’m too frightened to cut my own hand because it will hurt, and I’m nearly drunk, I have to admit, so I’ve cut you for no reason, and I just, I just—” he broke off, laughing harder, and Evan could see him clutching the shell in his hand, holding it above his own palm, but not bringing it down.

“Do you want me to do it then?” He said, trying not to smile.

“Yes, here, please get revenge, I’ll feel better.” He gave him the shell and Evan took him by the wrist and pulled his open hand toward him. Wesley turned his face away, still giggling, but Evan watched his fingers curl in expectation, and found himself gripped in the same helpless laughter.

“Forget it, I can’t do it either. Blood brothers,” he said, shaking his head. “What a stupid thing to cut me for.”

Wesley stopped him from throwing the shell out into the waves and said “No, don’t, it’s so pretty. Give it back. I’ll try again.”

Evan handed it back and lay in the sand next to him, wondering at how loose his movements felt, like someone had loosened all of his bolts until every limb and joint swung too far and too fast.

If this is as much as I ever get, it is enough, it has to be, he told himself. *We can stay like this, and not have to change anything.*

“Evan,” Wesley said, sitting up quickly. Evan didn’t answer but lay there in the spray of sand Wesley brushed from his jacket, until his face and neck and shirtfront were covered in a fine dusting. He kept his eyes closed, until Wesley said his name again.

“Evan. Come on, let’s go in.”

That first night in the crowded field hospital, Jennings sleeps restlessly, as always, and wakes in the small hours of the night with the sensation that someone is near him, quietly leaning over him in the dark, a man's voice, harsh, a delicate crunching sound, a hand holding his throat—

But no one is there, only the collective wheeze and sigh of soldiers sicker than him. The dream stays with him, draping the half-curtained cots and drip stands in the hazy layer of another world, a gilt-trimmed bedroom with sand-white walls, and the world tilts and spins for a long moment. He stands and walks through the tent before he can stop to think, with the rest of the world asleep, with even the whistling shells quiet, what it is he's looking for.

But the doctor is there, folded onto a cot like marsh bird, his long legs against his chest, holding a wad of gauze against the inside of his elbow. His eyes are wide open, still awake.

Jennings freezes, blood lurching, and clutches the edge of the empty cot beside him. Khannan smiles at him, faint enough he almost can't see it, and he walks slowly toward the cot, stopping only half a foot away, and kneels at eye level.

"You should not be awake," the doctor says, his eyes filmy and dull, and Jennings sees he's shivering beneath the thin blanket. He pulls off his coat, the movement shooting fire up the sides of his neck, and drapes it over him.

"It's alright, it will just be a moment and I will be fine." He clenches his teeth, the cords in his neck pulled taut. "It will just take a moment."

He takes a long breath and shudders, his legs kicking out. Jennings leans against them to steady him, and after a moment, presses his own burning forehead against the cool, damp of Khannan's neck, and strangely, the man does not pull away. They stay like that for a minute, then two, as his shaking calms, Jennings with his head fit between Khannan's collarbone and jaw.

"I lied about being forced to serve, actually," the doctor says in a dreamy voice, a suss and

rumble against Jennings' face. "I wasn't forced to serve here in France. I was drafted, yes, and sent to in the hospitals in Africa, then to Artois. I had no choice, I would be imprisoned. But after Artois, after Gallipoli, I couldn't—I couldn't imagine going back to what I had been."

Jennings tries focus on the doctor's words, to ignore the strange fire creeping up his neck.

"You have no idea what it was like, trying to keep up with the dead pouring into my hospital. I had a full staff, and even still, the men were brought back and stacked in heaps outside the tents. We couldn't keep up, I had to tell the stretcher bearers, *only bring the ones you know can survive, if you aren't sure, then bring someone else first*, and finally, we had no room, we had to start taking men who were dying, the ones there was simply no hope for, taking them outside to where they would wait to be buried, and leave them, we had no choice. I couldn't do anything for them. It was not like here, with your American supplies coming every other week, we ran out of morphine and antibiotics immediately, no ether even. It was medieval. After that, I had to go on, I couldn't leave the battlefield with the kamma of those men I left to boil and die in the sun hanging over me."

Khannan blinks his eyes, and rolls to his back, and Jennings wants to say *wait, lay still for just a minute longer*, but when he tries to speak he can't—his jaw is clamped, like it's been stitched shut, or clenched in anticipation, waiting for a blow to fall. He lifts his head and tries again, pushing against the pain, but finds he cannot open his mouth at all.

The doctor sees this, and reaches up a hand to Jennings' throat, his fingertips still cold against the burning skin, the tight muscles quivering and jumping beneath. He swallows, smoothing out his voice to say "I thought as much. You have tetanus. Lockjaw. You'll have to stay for another few days at least."

He unfolds his legs and stands, Jennings' coat peeling away to fall to the bed, but Khannan doesn't seem to notice. Jennings feels he is watching the man move through water, but can't tell if it's due to the doctor's languid movements, or to the pain seizing across his skull. Khannan takes a

step, and nearly falls as his knees crumple, and he catches himself on Jennings' shoulder.

"Excuse me," he says, and smiles down at him in the dim light. "It's the morphine, I need a drop of it now and again, if I've taken too much cocaine during the day." He laughs quietly, the sound light and almost giddy. "Aren't we a fine pair. Both of us stumbling and shivering around. Can you stand? I can barely keep my feet when I've taken morphine, so I can't be of much help, I'm afraid." He smears a hand across his face, pushing the hair away. "Come on then."

Jennings follows the doctor to a locked cabinet, where he gathers a stoppered vial and a syringe with a long needle.

"Can you remember where your bed is?" Khannan asks him. "You won't be able to stand much longer after the dose I'm going to give you, so let's have you lie down first."

He wants to ask the doctor whether it's the morphine that makes him so talkative, when he barely spared a word before, or simply the knowledge that Jennings can't reply.

They find his cot, and he sits, some old sense of etiquette making him reluctant to lie down in this man's presence, and Khannan rolls his sleeve up for him, asking him to make a fist, then slides the needle through the stopper and injects a full syringe of the stuff into Jennings' arm.

"There now, that should help. I'll keep you on this for the next few days, to keep the spasms from coming back. Your jaw will open by the time you wake up, you'll be able to eat, and as long as you aren't startled, you shouldn't have any more fits." He pauses, smiling. "I'm sorry we don't have anywhere quieter for you to go, but the morphine should be enough on it's own. A few days on it, just *resting*—to be perfectly honest, it sounds like a dream." He watches Jennings a moment, and when he sees his mouth working, goes and gets the ladle the nurses use to give water to injured patients. He holds it out, lets Jennings take it and drink by himself, and doesn't comment when he spills a good bit of it into his lap, only reaches to steady his hands and gently tip the cup for him.

"There seems to be a threshold now," Khannan says, his tone musing. "Two days usually,

maybe three or four, that after I've gone that long without sleeping more than an hour here and there, the cocaine takes hold of me and doesn't allow me to sleep even when I can, when I need to. A drop of morphine helps, of course, though I hate to let myself go completely out. But if I stay too long on the cocaine, without sleep—" he shakes his head. "It isn't good. The things I do— well, I am not myself. I tend to get, how should we say, too entranced in my duties, I'm too aggressive, take unnecessary risks."

Jennings feels a profound relaxation begin to wash over him, a slow dawning awe and Khannan reaches to take the empty ladle from him.

"Wai-hh" Jennings mumbles, his jaw muscles loosening. "What is the kahmma?"

"Kamma?" The doctor smiles, and Jennings wonders how he can look almost friendly.

"Kamma is what directs us through our lives, an accumulation of the things we have done, both in our past lives and current lives. A ripening of all our past actions into the waiting future."

He stands, still speaking about the circular nature of this Kamma, and walks away with the ladle, and before he returns Jennings drops away into sleep.

The next three days pass exactly as the doctor said they would. When he can open his eyes, he stares at the white canvas ceiling before he remembers the night before, and finds he can open his mouth again. The world around him moves disconcertingly fast, as if he's inside a fishbowl, floating in lukewarm water, watching people dash and flail from the other side of the glass.

The morphine has worn off by the time the nurses are going around with carts and bowls and feeding the less-able patients. Jennings realizes that he's fallen out consciousness so much throughout the day that he doesn't know if it's dinner they're serving, or lunch, or breakfast.

The doctor brings his next injections himself, but he is surly again, terse as he checks him over, his fingers light against his pulse, brushing under his jaw, along his spinal cord. Khannan asks him

simple questions—*how do you feel, when did you regain use of your jaw, do you feel any tightness here now, or here, how does it feel here*— and finally, he writes a couple of notes, gives him the injections, first the prophylactic, then the morphine, only half a syringe now, and leaves as Jennings' mind begins to drift away.

He wakes slowly, much later, floating up through the warm dark, and because it is silent and all but one lamp is out, he knows it must be the middle of the night, and Khannan is there on the empty bed beside his studying the floor.

“Doctor?” he says, his voice a wooden rasp. “What time is it?”

His head snaps up, and he comes forward.

“Two a.m., three perhaps. Once it's past midnight it's all the same until sunrise, really.”

He struggles with this for a moment, then realizes it's an abstract statement and nods, pulling himself up to a sitting position. Khannan hands him a cup of water, and between sips, Jennings asks if there have been more rumors of the German offensive and his company's orders.

Khannan hesitates and Jennings leans forward.

“What is it?” he asks, trying to keep the frantic note out of his voice. “Have they already gone?”

“The entire company will be sent out in three days, I hear.” He sits down on the edge of the bed, letting Jennings move to make room. “And I believe they'll take anyone well enough to walk.”

He lays down again, lightheaded. “Good. I'll be well enough by then.”

“You are that eager to fight?”

“Of course not, I hate it as much as any man. But it's— my duty, I suppose. Something I feel I owe, at least.”

“Do you understand what I mean when I speak of Kamma?” he asks. When Jennings says no,

he leans his head back, staring up, and says “It’s something like your ‘duty,’ I think. Think of the things we do, or have done, as stones laid into the road before us. We walk on them, and follow the road we’ve made forward.” His smile makes him yet another man Jennings hasn’t seen. “It isn’t just about paying penance. Or maybe I mean, we all have our own kamma, and it isn’t as easy as owing and being owed.”

Jennings wants to ask if he’ll be sent with them as the field doctor as well. He knows now how his company sees Khannan, and worries he’ll be abandoned again, that in his exhausted rage, he’ll go out alone.

But he doesn’t want to break this spell of calm, so he asks instead where he is from.

Khannan smiles down at him and says simply, “A very hot, very lovely place you’ve never been, called Ayemenem,” and then turns, folding his legs up to lie beside him, slipping his hands beneath Jennings’ clothes, and though he is calmer than the first time, his movements languid and drugged, Jennings is careful to lie perfectly still, allowing Khannan push his mouth onto his and hold his wrists above his head, to order him to grip the bed frame behind him the entire time as he struggles to keep silent.

“Why did you volunteer that night?” the doctor asks him later.

“I—” Jennings thinks for a minute. “I was so angry, seeing your stretcher bearers abandon their jobs like that, for them to just turn their backs, and I thought, surely he won’t still try to go out there alone?”

“But you knew how reckless it was? That it wasn’t normal procedure?”

“Well,” Jennings says, afraid to reveal how ignorant he is here, but then he feels Khannan shaking against his side, and twists his head to see him laughing, silently.

“Fine, then, no I didn’t actually know how absurd it was to go over then. Maybe they should have stopped you, but—” He shakes his head, knowing he can’t explain it well, but the morphine

has loosened his tongue too. “But even just looking at you, standing there raging, it seemed so logical, so correct that I should follow you over.”

A minute passes, and another, and Khannan doesn’t answer. Jennings thinks he must have fallen asleep but then he clears his throat softly and says, “Well. I fear you are a poor judge of person, then.”

He sounds almost embarrassed, and Jennings fights back a smile he couldn’t see anyway.

“Well, yes,” he says. “I suppose a lot of people have told me that.”

The drug sends him into long, vivid dreams that yank him away into the past and then the future, into other lives fully imagined and begun, lived and ended in the space of an hour, until he feels he’s been in this bed for years. He wakes throughout the day, and it seems there is always someone beside him when he does: a nurse, or Greyson, or Fraser once, with a look of concern, or of course, Khannan. There is no predicting whether he will be cold and furious, holding his next injection, or waiting with a look of sleepy amusement on his face, wanting an audience for his musings about war and fate.

The dreams he slogs through, helpless, are not what he would have chosen. Wesley is there, but it’s his shadow passing an open door, his laugh coming from an empty room. His father’s voice, harsh-toned, and distant. His sister’s face, twisted in worry, reading a letter to him—one he’s written, or one Lily sent him, or even once, the letter that ruined everything. The dreams almost always end with a sharp pain in his head, with people shouting, sounding joyful, and somehow, he knows the sound has to do with him, but doesn’t understand how.

Instead, it’s only when he is nearly awake, his mind moving even when the rest of him can’t, that he can think of the summer before. The morphine loosens the hold he has on that time, and though he hasn’t let himself dwell on that night for more than a year, he wraps himself in it now

when he hovers between waking and sleep.

That night with Wesley, as they walked from the beach back into the house is smudged and worn in Jennings' memory now, so that he does not remember sneaking in through veranda doors opened for dancing and skirting the party, only remembers still images, impressions. The bright glow and laughter in the ballroom as they passed. The slap their bare feet made on the cool marble. The giddy strangeness of Wesley clutching him by the fingers, as if he might shy away or vanish. Though he knows he fell at some point in the night because he woke the next morning with matching bruises on his shin and hip, he does not remember slipping on the grand front staircase, clutching at Wesley and pulling him down with him, both of them too overcome with the hilarity of their own helplessness to stand for nearly two minutes. He almost remembers sliding his hand beneath Wesley's jaw, his fingers curling around his neck to draw him in and kiss him there on the stairs before they stood. But that couldn't be, surely he could never have done such a bold thing, such a stupid thing, so he convinces himself that he does not remember correctly.

But at the top of the stairs, as Wesley led him into his room, Evan's mind regained traction, the feeling of all the blood in his body sloshing about settling again, and he became suddenly conscious, so aware of everything—the dark room with open windows, the rasp of his clothing against his skin as he undressed, Wesley leaning back against the bed to watch him, the sheets gritty with sand from the beach that stuck to their flushed skin and scraped their burning nerves, the surprising coolness of Wesley's tongue slipping down from his neck to trace the edges of his ribs, his hipbones and then the jolt, the sustained, full-body gasp as Wesley dipped his head and took him into his mouth.

This is what he would choose to dream when he is lost in the morphine, during the hours and hours that whirl around without taking hold. The feeling of Wesley's forehead pressed between his shoulder blades, his voice saying *Evan, Evan, Evan*, sounding as if it was torn out of him again and

again. When he lets himself think about this night, what he remembers most clearly is trying to hold that sound in his head, the most unpracticed, true sound he ever heard Wesley make, thinking, *this, at least I have had this. It is enough.*

But instead his fevered dreams seem caught in the after, the morning when he woke up in the full, stifling sunlight, the room empty except for Wesley's cufflink, fallen behind the door, and one long wing of the translucent shell on the pillow beside him. Wesley had already left the estate, hours earlier than everyone else would, and Evan had to go through the charade of pleading hangover, eating the prepared breakfast in silence as the people around him talked over his head, laughing and recounting moments from the night before. He'd been careful to seem amused at the talk, and act as if he remembered some of the stories as well, as though he'd only been in the background of the dance, watching all along, which is what he said when one or two of his friends asked where he had disappeared to.

He knows now he needn't have tried so hard, that everyone who saw him that morning either knew where he had been the night before, or would know before the week was out.

He wakes again and looks around, and yes, Khannan is there, in the next cot as he has been the last few nights, lying on his back staring up into the oily smoke that gathers in the peak of the tent. Jennings can feel his mind slowly waking, the empty space of his last few days stretching larger and darker as it does, and he reaches for Khannan and asks, "How long have I been in here?"

"Five days, nearly. You've not had any spasms since the first night, and you'll make a complete recovery, I'm sure."

Jennings nods. "So tomorrow they will come and collect the rest of us?"

Khannan reaches out, and takes Jennings by the wrist—gripping hard, urgently, but when he

speaks, it's almost too quiet to be heard. "You don't need to go. You've shown your courage, and now you're ill, and this time, it won't—it will be worse. It will be so much worse."

Jennings knows any movement could make Khannan drop his wrist or walk away, but he is waiting for an answer, so he says "I know. But I'm ready for it. I know, I've been so stupid about it, but no matter how it goes, even if I die out there, it will be something important. It, somehow, it will be enough."

He waits for Khannan's face to close, his full mouth hardening the way it does before he stands and walks away. But he only sits on the edge of the cot, facing away, and says "My American replacement arrived this morning."

"What? Does that mean you're leaving?"

Khannan nods. "I imagine so."

"Home? Back to—" he stumbles over the word, and Khannan flinches, shakes his head.

"I expect, actually, that I will be sent to the front as well. They will want the new doctor to stay here and prepare for the end of this campaign."

"Campaign?"

He nods. "The Germans have started their last push, it seems. The war is nearly over."

Jennings lies back, looking at the ropes crisscrossing the tent ceiling. "Good. I'm ready."

He can see this wasn't the answer the doctor wanted, but after a moment he blinks, brushes a hand across Jennings' hair, then says "I'll go and get your injection."

He carries an extra vial of morphine with him when he returns, and a small tray with a scalpel, a pile of snowy gauze, a needle and thick, black thread, and a peculiar, delicate glass tube with rounded edges, piped into a right angle. Jennings sits up and asks what the tray is for, but Khannan shushes him and doesn't answer, his face a closed mask once again. He gives him the injection, and begins to unbutton Jennings' shirt. Jennings catches his fingers, clumsily, as his face grows numb,

and drops his head onto Khannan's shoulder, pressing his lips against his neck, his jaw, the side of his mouth, and for the first time, he doesn't shove him away, only removes Jennings' shirt completely and says "Shh, shh, lie back now."

Khannan stands there watching as the world fades away and somewhere in the wide, dark sea of his sleep Jennings has the impression of a weight bearing down on him from above, and though he can open his eyes, just barely, the drug is too heavy to allow him to cry out or move. Khannan does his work quickly—he finishes tying Jennings' wrists, ankles and torso to the cot with long strips of a sheet, then carefully wipes an alcohol-soaked cloth up and down the base of his bare throat, across his collarbone, and up to his jaw. He cleans his own hands with the same cloth before taking the scalpel and measures an inch with his knuckle, from just above the notch in his collarbone to just below his adam's apple. He takes a deep breath, looks up to see Jennings still watching, and reaches up to close Jennings' eyes before sinking the scalpel into his throat.

He sees the doctor only once more, when he wakes the next afternoon with a heavy pain in his throat. Khannan is there when he opens his eyes, and pulls Jennings' hand away when he tries to touch his neck.

"Here now," he says. "Don't touch it, it will hurt."

Jennings opens his mouth, tries to ask what happened, but his dry mouth can only make gulping, smacking sounds as the air whistles out of the tube protruding from his throat.

"I'm sorry, you won't be able to talk. I—" he pauses, looking behind him.

Another man appears beside him in a doctor's uniform, American, who speaks loudly, as though he has plugs in his ears, and behind him Greyson, Jennings' officer.

"I found him last night in the middle of a fit—sustained muscle spasms, complete truisms, no startle or provocation as far as I could tell. He'd just come out of a morphine sleep when the spasms

started and he was suffocating, so I was forced to intubate him.”

Greyson frowns. “I was told he was well just yesterday, what happened?”

Khannan doesn’t respond but continues addressing the other doctor. “I could see no other options for emergency treatment, and I have no doubt he’ll make a full recovery, but he certainly isn’t fit for duty.”

“Even if you closed up that—” Greyson gestures at his own throat, and coughed.

The American doctor rolls his eyes and Khannan carefully explains that the stress of battle would send him into full body seizures and endanger everyone around him. Jennings instinctively tries to argue, to speak up and say he can fight, but at the noise of his breath whistling out of the tube, Greyson looks away.

After Greyson leaves, the American doctor claps Khannan on the back and says he’s impressed he could do such a neat job alone, and in the dark too.

“They’ll be glad to have someone steady as you out where you’re going. I hear it’s downright chaos at the moment.”

He leans over to shake Jennings’ hand, too, and tells him not to worry, he’d still be in good hands, and then walks away abruptly, calling for the head nurse.

Khannan stays beside him for just a moment longer, keeping just out of reach.

“You will probably be in some pain if they ration the morphine,” he says, “and in a week or so, they’ll only send you back out again, but for now, this was what I could think of.” The doctor takes a deep breath, holds it, lets it out in a huff. “For me, it is enough. It will have to be.”

Jennings would later be called the luckiest man in his company—the only one kept back from the front, where more than half of them fell—Greyson, the frightened young private, even Fraser—caught between a larger wing of German infantry and a battery of machine guns that hadn’t actually

been destroyed, as reported.

Neither of the men who appear in the beds beside him were with his unit, and neither can tell him anything of Khannan, so Jennings pesters the nurses to exasperation, until one finally brings over a lost French soldier whose battalion, in the scattering fray, had ended up near Combles with his regiment. In halting, flat English the soldier, a short man with a large nose and worried squint, explains he did see the Indian doctor, and after searching for the words to explain it kindly, gives up and pulls his own hair back to trace a circle in the soft skin behind his ear, saying “Here. Bullet hit here, he falls right away. Buried somewhere with the others, I think.”

The nurse crosses herself and thanks the man, but when she turns to Jennings, her face is untroubled and she says, genuinely surprised, “Why are you *weeping?*”

He is declared fit for duty only two weeks after Khannan’s diagnosis—but too late, much too late. He is sent to a new battalion, and fights in Cantigny, then on the Marne, in Amiens, and again at Saint-Quentin Canal. Shrapnel severs a tendon in his right arm and paralyzes all but his thumb and first finger, but when the war ends, he is healthy, remarkably untouched.

He stays in Europe for years, unable to bear an America aloft on its perceived role of last-minute Jack saving the day when anyone with sense knows the filthy, brutal war accomplished nothing, created nothing, gave nothing in exchange for the ragged shell holes it tore in the future. He visits Fraser’s mother once, in London, and the woman is polite but unsure of how to react to this healthy, soft-spoken American saying her son was so good to him, saying he was right, he was right about it all, and after she feeds him and lets him tell her the story of every cigarette, every sardonic look her boy ever gave him, he realizes this visit, his blundering about, trampling in her memories, was painful to her, and nothing else.

When he thinks of Khannan, he can find only glimpses—a flash of that grimace, the heavy-

lidded eyes, or he remembers tracing the long line of his sunken cheek, the delicate curve of his closed eyelids, the taste of his skin layered over the sour-sweet morphine that coated his mouth. He spends two months in Ayemenem, before the second war, but and though he finds the address of a woman he thinks could be Khannan's mother or aunt, or sister even, he doesn't know what he could say about this man, whose first name—Ashok—he hadn't even known before he died.

There are times, after the war when he thinks of telling Sarah, telling her everything, more than just how the doctor who gave him the small, white scar, the length and shape of a buttonhole, saved him. But whenever he brings up the war, even though he has less to tell of it than any survivor he knows, his sister weeps and apologizes convulsively, saying how stupid, how completely, utterly idiotic she was to push him toward it, saying he should never forget it, and should never forgive her either, and so he doesn't know how to speak of Khannan in a way that won't harm her more, too.

More than anything, he wishes that in those last moments while Khannan waited for him to lose consciousness he could have said something, argued or reassured him, told him not to do this, or not to worry, or to please come back. He is sure, even, that he opened his mouth, but in the end, it's only later, much later, that he can even think of what to say, how to phrase it.

Twist and shrink and burst apart

She finds the cat one afternoon between shifts, the day after mainland forecasters finally give the tropical depression out in the Atlantic a name. On days like these, when she hasn't slept, she likes to walk past the volleyball nets and man-made sand dunes to the slender rock pier the city built years ago, before the oil crisis. Even at midday, when the beach churns with radios and gulls and sweating, yelling people, the pier is quiet, pointing like a finger out into the bay where swimming is discouraged and fishing prohibited—and pointless, since it's here the current dumps the residual oil, where the heavy, animal odor mixes with the sharp, clear smell of salt and seaweed.

But it's here she found the sun bursts off the slick in a thousand colors, a kaleidoscopic film roiling with the gentle motion of the waves. Here she likes to stretch out on the searing slate in her turquoise work bikini and get high, letting the spectrummed light crash against the thin wall of her eyelids, burnsafed skin baking in the sun until the bartender texts her to come back for her afternoon shift. The aging the beachfront hotel where she works pulls in business year round, mostly conferences for mainland execs who like the view, but this close to the end of summer, the patio bar where the girl waits tables and mixes drinks is sand-worn and lagging, quieter every day.

Her coworkers' parties always carry on past the small, dark hours of the morning, and her first shift is usually at eight a.m. If she shows up early, G, the silent line cook, will make a couple of breakfast tacos for her to eat when no one is watching, so instead of walking halfway across the island to the apartment where she pays sixty dollars a month to sleep on a stranger's futon, she always stays until the last people stumble out, and follows them into the humid city to wander and feel the ghost-warmth still rising off the asphalt for the few hours before she has to be at work.

At the party the night before, a boy had brought her a drink on the back porch, walking

straight to her as if he knew who she was. He was a friend of the waitress with the tangerine bikini, and when she told him her name he laughed, not in a mean way, but because the tropical storm moving in has the same name.

Sounds like a Stephen King movie, he said. The mysterious girl appears, a storm follows her in and decimates the whole island.

I've been here for a while. And it's not supposed to be *that* bad. Not like Mackay.

Oh, it'll be bad, he said, and motioned towards the beach. I promise. This island's gotten so shitty it needs to be leveled.

You don't like it here?

It's fine I guess. He shrugs. But they gotta hit the restart button sometime.

The girl watched through the living room window as the song changed and people moved faster, with Ina, the sea foam green waitress, whirling in the middle, glancing off the men around her, grinning up at them. It was strange to watch her dancing in the same black halter top she was wearing, strange knowing how easy it would be to sidle up to people like that, aping her drunken smile, how easy it would be to change into someone else and watch the world recalibrate around her.

The boy tried to tell her about his research on neutron stars at the island's university. You know, when a star gets too big, it collapses, then supernovas, and bang! A new star is born.

She nodded, trying to not step back, keep smiling. Sounds like a movie, she says. A Star is Reborn, with zombie Judy Garland back from the dead.

Not reborn, just born. See, that's it, that's exactly fucking it. Everybody says it's the old star, compressed and reformed, but it's not—the fucking neutrons aren't the same, they have a completely new charge, and the Pauli equation. You know. It's completely brand new.

The porch seemed to tilt crazily for a second, and she takes too long to answer, thinking about the difference between born and reborn and in her silence, the boy ducked back inside, mumbling

he wanted to get another drink.

And the next day, as she walks to the end of the pier, she rolls it around in her mind still, this idea of a separate, unique star where the other had died, and she hears a thin, hiccupping wail. She climbs down the slanting rock faces and sees a wet knot of seaweed and fur floating on the seam of oily water and rock. A cat, somehow, and it's caught, so as the water sighs down between waves, it stretches flat against the rock. Its back legs are tied, its front leg caught in a crevice.

Shh, she tells it, and lifts it, holds it curled against her, cupping its face. The bones of its spine press into her arms, its skull like an eggshell. Blood smears across her chest, her arms, beading in the oil and salt water, and she asks, How the fuck did you get like this?

The cat fumbles its front legs around her neck, clinging with surprising strength. *Don't throw me back.*

She carries it up the beach to the hotel. The bartender sees her coming and says, Aww man, no, but gets an empty Patrón box and some dry rags, lets her bring it behind the horseshoe-shaped bar to sit in the doorway of the dry-storage closet. She drags the seaweed out of its long fur and soaks up as much of the oil as she can. The blood is coming from a cut on its front leg, and she wraps it in a rag.

Creepy Ken, the gaunt environmentalist, leans over the bar.

That's got to be the first living thing that's come out of that water in years, dumbass swimmers included.

Not all of the swimmers die, she says, not bothering to look up, knowing he wouldn't make eye contact anyways.

Sure they do, maybe just not right away. Ever heard of Ebola? Lupus? Kuru? It's all the oil and chemicals and shit they dump in there, that's what kills you.

I think the water's beautiful.

He grins at her. 'Course you do, sweetie.

Ken favors her over the other waitresses because she 'looks the most natural.' Since her brother had come out so well, her parents shied away from DNA-level alterations. At nineteen, her height and slight build made her look like child in a crowd of adults.

The cat falls asleep, and the swing-shift waitresses, lime green and salmon pink, take turns sneaking back to touch its candy nose, the rose petal pads of its tiny paws.

Roman comes by and sees her there, but only frowns and doesn't tell her to get back to work. She shows him the cat, the twine she cut from its legs, and he nods.

Lot of times mainlanders dump their pets off the causeway at night, he says. Sometimes they tie their legs in case the fall doesn't get them. It's crazy it survived.

He kneels, knees bumping her thighs, and turns the cat over in her lap. Figures, he says, touching its distended stomach. Kittens are easier to kill before they're born.

She doesn't bother to ask how he knows so much about this—she thinks it means something, that they don't ask each other meaningless questions. When he hired her a few months ago, he didn't ask why she didn't have references or bank account or a permanent address, only if she'd already had the sweat glands in her temples and armpits removed, as well as all the usual body hair. She'd nodded, grateful her mother had done that, at least. As she left that day, he'd brushed the back of her neck, twisting the end of her ponytail briefly, and after a few weeks of meeting his stares and going still when he touched the small of her back, she'd wandered into his office in the cool, tomb-like hotel basement, and let him fuck her on his desk. The careful way he'd cleared his papers away first made her think they would get involved, but it was just the one time, and he is as private as she is. Even so, she feels they have a sort of alliance in this anthill of leering men and loud, voluptuous girls.

God, she looks ready to pop, he says. I wonder if they're still alive.

He stands and tells her she can go home if she'd like, since the weekend's guests won't arrive until the next morning, and the patio is empty. He wipes a smear of blood off her chest with his thumb, and she pauses.

You found it out off the pier? Roman asks.

She nods. It was caught, she says.

He whistles slowly, already looking out towards the beach to gauge the dinner crowd. Magic cat, he says. You should hang on to it.

That night, she doesn't sleep, afraid to roll over on the cat curled against her. The roommates were pissed, and said it needed to be gone by the weekend or they would throw it back in the harbor themselves.

Her phone lights up, vibrating, and she answers politely, pretending she doesn't already know who's calling.

Won't you come back, the woman on the other end says. Please, we just want you to come back. This woman, who used to be her mother, always hesitates in strange places, and in the dark, it is easy to imagine the ghostly neon glow of the connection cut in places, making her voice echo back alien and strained.

She wants to ask, *who is this 'we.'* If there was any change in her brother's condition, surely this woman would say so.

Sometimes she only listens to the pleas. Tonight, she talks about her job, the drinks she serves—dark & stormy nights, rumba-rump rumrunners, skinny bitch margaritas. The guests are not what you'd expect, she says. They are not glamorous. I don't think they even like the beach.

Just come back, the voice crackles against her ear, making her wince. Stop hiding.

Do you really think Dylan would even recognize me?

I don't know, the woman sobs, I don't know and I need you here, I forgive you, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

She ends the call and lays the phone as far beneath the futon as she can reach.

Get me out of here, she whispers into the cat's fur. It stretches to an impossible length, purring, and she doesn't answer her phone when it buzzes again.

She finds the house the next morning. It's her day off, and she walks to the far tip of the island where the city melts into colonies of trailers whose vinyl siding is still shiny. She pauses to watch two teenagers argue, standing ten feet apart between trailers, the boy smoking and the girl shouting and balancing on a broken cinder block.

She follows the south shore to where the island narrows to a point—the southwest peninsula, curled like a finger. The concrete gives way to gravel one-lanes, gives way to sand, to wide stretches of pale cordgrass, saw grass, salt grass. There is a huddled group of beach cottages surrounded on three sides by wispy marsh. The sand around them is smooth and unmarked, and as she gets closer, she realizes most of them are crumbling, the group of them looking like a mouthful of rotted teeth. Hurricane houses.

The window is what she notices first about the house she chooses—the only whole glass window along that beach. The north wall of the living room gapes, its frame laid bare as a ribcage, but the back half is whole and dry. The master bedroom has a full roof and that massive bay window facing the shore and bright, jewel-tinted waves.

She pays a teenager with a truck to help her move her suitcase, the box with the cat, and the futon mattress, which she decides to steal at the last minute. That night, she places the cat's box carefully in the center of the empty room, her room now, and looks around in the ghostly light, and

grins, whispers *thank you*. The house hunches closer over her and watches as she opens the box, touches that tiny still thing.

The cat seems to improve overnight, purring constantly, devouring everything she brings home. The girl spends the next two days in the house with it, watching it climb up the heaps of plaster and broken sheetrock in the empty rooms, and rescuing it when it seems about to tumble off. She carries in heaps of sand in a blanket to pile in the living room corner for it to use as a litter box, and lays out stolen hotel towels on the concrete kitchen floor, where the sun comes through a missing chunk in the roof, so she can sit next to it and light up while it sleeps. When she walks home at night, she can just make out the shine of its eyes where it sits in the bay window, and she likes to imagine it poses there all day, watching down the long beach for her to come shuffling home.

A week passes, as she rewraps its leg each day with paper towels and carries it out onto the sand to watch it stalk the rat-sized ghost crabs. The cut heals quickly, and she tries not to think about the kittens that could be dead inside it, though its belly is visibly growing. Surely dead kittens wouldn't grow.

There is no electricity or plumbing in the house, but she brings a jug of water home from work each night, and uses toilets at taco shacks and beach port-a-potties. Only the bedroom doorknob locks, but no one is out here, and she can't imagine something bad happening on this hushed slender part of the island, curved like the arch of woman's back, where the air rushes across the blonde cord grass but leaves the shallow bright water at its roots untouched and still. She feels safe among the scattered houses, all frozen in stages of collapse, waiting to be rebuilt. At dusk, the shoreline comes closer, until deep in the night, the waves sound as if they're rushing beneath the thin floor, foaming around the house's stilts while she hovers above, listening to the voices that bubble inside the walls.

She stops answering her phone, letting it buzz on the bedside table, a collapsible TV tray she painted in an arte-nouveau medallion pattern. It's the only thing in the entire house that looks as if a human has touched it with good intentions lately. Even her bed looks abandoned, her sheets mused, sprinkled with the wood splinters and sand she tracks in from the outer rooms.

Each morning she takes the ferry to work, across the dip in the island's spine to the main bulk of the city. The ferry passengers are usually factory workers or college students going out to the mainland, or tourists coming in, looking for the old war bunker with its missing pieces gauged out by shells, looking for the marsh birds—tricolored herons, roseate spoonbills, greater egrets— that don't exist on the mainland anymore. Or, lately, they are construction workers, or realtors with young hopefuls in tow. It seems the far tail of the island is slowly shaking itself back awake after Hurricane Mackay veered off path unexpectedly, as if yanked with a string. It's been almost a year, and some of the neighborhoods are being rebuilt with bright paint and fiberglass windows, though she's never seen another person near her house.

How's the magic cat, Roman asks her. He has come out to expo tickets during the lunch rush to find there is no lunch rush. The waitresses have gone down as far as the shore to offer menus, but the few people down there all brought their own coolers.

She jerks up from her magazine, surprised. It is the first time he's spoken directly to her in days, and her sweat turns cold, skin humming with charge. He asks again, and she shrugs, carefully, tells him it's fine, the cut is healed.

Were the kittens dead after all?

No, she says. The vet said they probably didn't toss her over the causeway, just dropped her offshore. This is a lie, she hasn't taken it to a vet, but it sounds reasonable and he nods.

And it hasn't had them yet? It's been, what, a week? Week and a half?

The vet said they're just big kittens, it's not that far along.

He frowns. Well, let me know. My wife might like one.

Of course, she says, watching the lemon yellow waitress gather discarded menus from the sand. I will.

He follows her gaze, and she can see the way he swallows, his eyes glazing as he watches the lemon yellow waitress too.

Shit, he says. A storm in a week, and this is the biggest crowd we got?

A week? she asks. That soon?

Less than, maybe. What, you don't watch TV? He kind of laughs when she shakes her head, and says, Figures. It's bigger now, could be a 4. You got somewhere to go?

Sure, she says, but it won't be that bad, right?

Not the end of the world, but still, better take off just to be safe. They thought last summer wouldn't be that bad, either. You have family here?

She nods, says, Yeah, on the mainland. I'll go home for a little. See my mom and brother.

This is also a lie. She has not been off this island since she moved here last year, right after their hurricane, after the wreck she drove herself and her brother and her father into, after her brother was moved home in a coma with a personal nurse, all paid for by her father's life insurance. But again, Roman nods and seems satisfied.

In bed that night, she thinks of the way he looked at the other waitress, how his glance seemed to slide away from hers, looking everywhere but at her.

Make me like her, she whispers into the cat's fur, *if that's what he wants now*.

When she goes to sleep she hears the faint beeping of her brother's heart monitor, and the

leftover motion from a day spent on and around the waves makes her dream that she flails through the crests and troughs of his neon EKG

And the next morning, the teenage boy sweeping the ferry's cabin asks, Did you change your hair?

No, no that's someone else. You're thinking of someone else.

This is what she says when returning customers mention she looks different from last time they were there, and since the waitresses are a constant flurry of tanned girls in rainbow swimsuits, all smiling, all lovely and gone soon enough anyways, no one ever questions her further.

A day passes, and another, and another starts, and still the cat does not give birth. Its belly has doubled in size and drags the ground, rubbing off clumps of black fur to show flushed, shining skin. It bleats constantly, like an infant, and the pitiful sound scrapes her ears. She had planned to take it to the vet, but put it off, afraid she couldn't afford it, afraid what they would find inside it, and now, it feels too late.

Besides, most vets on the island have closed their clinics and nailed siding over their windows by now.

She wakes these nights in the silence to find the cat crouched on her lungs, its head in the shallow bowl between her breasts, both of them listening. If she rubs her wrist across its forehead, she can feel its low bass purr in her ribs before it expands to fill the room. The cat's belly swells each day—now a grapefruit, now a melon, uncomfortably hard. Roman was right, there is something wrong. The cat needs a ramp, fashioned from a broken piece of plywood, to even climb onto the mattress. It has been over two weeks since she rescued it, and each day its belly grows, but still, no birth.

But the cat is still eating and drinking, still dragging itself to the living room to dig a neat hole in the piled sand and shit. So she waits with it in the dark, listening to voices murmur in the walls and imagining what the wind will sound like when it comes, willing her phone to ring until sometimes, it does.

Ina, the sea foam green waitress, leans her elbow on the girl's shoulder and asks if she feels like getting fucked up. She tries hard to not lean away, or tense her arms.

What kind of fucked up?

Oooh, crazy girl, Ina laughs. Not like that. A bunch of us are leaving tomorrow, so we're gonna go out to The Pink Dolphin. They're saying it'll hit the seawall pretty hard, so you know. Last time to dance on the shark floor and all.

I thought the sharks were a myth.

Wait, you never been there? She laughs, shrieking a little. There's this whole glass floor with water in it, and they project the sharks in with holographs or something. You gotta come and see it, especially if it's gonna get Macked.

It's not supposed to be that bad.

Ina looks at her strangely, as if realizing this is the first conversation they've had.

But the girl goes along that night, dreading walking back through the heavy brown rain swirling the streets into a maze, making the island a dark, alien place. She dreads finding the cat bigger and the walls wrapped tighter, the air hot and wet in her room.

The club is different than the house parties these people throw, where she can float from room to room with a grin and a drink, somebody new with each cluster of students and dropouts she talks to. Here, she cups her fluorescent martini against her and stands back, watching the only

people she knows twist and shrink and burst apart in the rippling colored light.

Someone touches her shoulder, and she jumps at his shadowed face, his teeth and the whites of his eyes glowing.

Hey, he says, I met you before, right? At that party? I, uh, I was kinda drunk.

Oh, she says, and remembers the star boy. Oh! Hi!

Hey. He laughs, and dips his head a little. I promise not to bore you this time.

No, no you didn't bore me. I keep thinking about it.

Oh yeah? About neutron stars?

Well, yeah, how they're completely different, new molecules or something.

God, I was hammered. At least I was right about the storm, huh?

Yeah. She looks down at her drink, and nods her head. But it was okay, I thought it was really interesting.

Well shit, then, let's talk about black holes or something.

She laughs here, a little breathed out *huh*, and cants her shoulders forward, looking up at him.

Maybe you can help me, she says. How big does something have to get before it has its own gravity?

He laughs. Bigger than you ever need to worry about.

No, it's this cat I found. It's pregnant, and it just keeps growing. Like it swallowed a tennis shoe.

Oh. Are you beginning to orbit it?

It's a legitimate concern.

Hmm, well I can come by tonight and take a look at it, give you my professional opinion if you want.

But they go to his apartment, not her house. And though it is nothing life-changing, and though he doesn't tell her anything more about how stars collapse and are made new, the place is

clean and silent, and afterwards, she curls up, and sleeps and nothing wakes her.

Everything is restless the next morning—the clouds, the closer shoreline, the buildings looming in the steady drizzle.

When Roman walks out to the empty patio, on his cell phone, the lime green waitress jumps and tosses her cigarette. The girl pushes off the wall and holds his gaze while he repeats instructions to hold the liquor order, then taps his ear to end the call.

The last guests are checking out after lunch, he says, and we're closing up tonight. I want you all to get out of here, too. It should be here day after tomorrow.

The lime green waitress high-fives the bartender, and they head off to change.

The girl picks up her bag, and pauses, looking at this man, the only person on this island she would listen to. Her throat itches, and she tries to swallow.

Roman. Her voice croaks and she flinches.

What are you going to do?

She shrugs. Go home, I guess?

To the mainland?

Well, yeah.

Are you sure? he says.

What?

Nothing. Look, I'm sorry about—about before. I wish it hadn't happened. God, I'd kill for a fucking reset button sometimes, but it doesn't work that way, does it?

She shrugs, watching the low clouds thicken and bruise over the hotel. It's been there for two hundred years, one of the oldest buildings on the island, an oracle. Surely it will still be here after.

Look, do you need anything? I can drive you to the mainland tomorrow when we leave. I can

take you somewhere.

She coughs a little to clear her sticky throat. What do you mean?

He backs away a step, then reaches forward and cups the back of her head, says, Be careful, then turns and walks into the hotel.

The wind off the ocean rakes her hair into knots, yanking like fingers. Roman left that morning, along with everyone else on the island. Her drenched T-shirt whips tight around her, and she can't remember the last time it was this cool after ten in the morning. She walks down the seawall to the public beach, knowing she has a long walk back to the house if the ferry has quit running, which of course, it probably has.

When she reaches the beach, it feels clammy, expectant in the steady rain. She thinks about the mainlanders who hunt beach treasure after a storm whips the sand away, but they won't find anything here. This beach is cleaned and combed to a fine, new sand by service vehicles that vacuum up and down every morning at five. She used to come down here to feel the sticky cool draft off the ocean as the sky began to blanch, and watch the trucks sucking the sand into their giant tanks, filling them with trash and spitting out the bleached white sand, so clean no one would ever know it wasn't a fresh, brand-new beach.

The wind far offshore grows steadily louder, its whirring almost like the noise machine her brother used to sleep with. He was one of those dead-serious children, strangely confident, except he couldn't sleep. When he left for college, she kept his noise machine, though the muffled sound unnerved her more than regular dark.

She wonders if this beach will look the same after the storm is through with it. The hurricane really will be what everyone's been saying, she knows that now, and curls her shoulders down over her knees, wishing someone would have told her this wasn't what she wanted. She could stand and

walk across that three-mile causeway, but to where? What would be the point?

Instead, she stands, and brushes the sand and broken specks of shell off her legs and returns once more to the house, and she falls asleep early that night as the wind begins to shake her bedroom door.

There is no sun the next day, just a thick purple sky and rain blowing under the door. She hasn't charged her phone in days, and has no idea what time it is. The cat has wedged itself behind a pile of broken siding, and she digs it out and holds it in her lap as she lights the joint a bartender rolled her before he left, staring out that foolish bay window at the textured, roiling clouds. It's beautiful, despite everything, and she thinks maybe, maybe we won't die after all.

If we can just get through this, she whispers into the cat's fur, I'll take you to the vet. We'll live somewhere with carpet, and start over. Everything. Just let me start over.

The cat begins to pant, hard, its breath whistling across a dry tongue, and she stops.

Are you ok?

A low growl or a moan builds from its stomach and it screeches, twisting suddenly, and bites down on her wrist. She jerks, *shit!* and drops it and the joint, and the cat scabbles across the floor to hide behind her suitcase, where it mews and pants.

Shit, she says. Shit, oh shit, not now, not today.

When the storm hits, the sirens ringing the island start up, sounding like a pack of dogs—one howl beginning, hesitant, then swelling until the others join in with layered pitches, until the noise becomes a knot of one sustained note, threading through the roar of the wind and circling the island in a charged loop, so in a second it sounds as if it has burrowed into the house, then swoops away and becomes something she imagined.

She crawls into the bathtub and pulls a heavy lawn blanket from the hotel over her head. In the dark, the noise swarms around her, shaking the house on its tiny stilts and beating against her head until there, in the middle of it all, the wail of the cat rises, piercing, from the other room.

She's read about the scream a cat makes when in pain, how every other horrific sound before it seems commonplace, and it was true, it was all true. She curses and flips the blanket off, stumbles back into the other room to find it, but behind the suitcase there is so much blood, the cat a heaving, sticky mass of matted fur, its pink mouth gaping as it claws at the floor and the cat screams as if it's being split in two, seems to swell and lengthen, the blood flowing out, a formless black mass emerging.

She jerks back and slips, the floor suddenly slick with the oil and sea foam surging up between the boards, the sharp acrid smell mixing with metallic blood as she screams and chokes on the rising vomit, the cords in her throat buckling.

And now the walls press in, closer, closer, until the noise of the wind and the horns and the shattering window and the shrieking cat and the water rushing into the house are compressed, until she feels herself forced into a smaller and smaller place, a core at the middle of this wide chaos and noise wrapping tighter, until the silence bursts and rushes out from her mind to fill the empty house beyond.

Remember your way back

Even after we came to the hospital and were put inside the iron lungs, our bodies still grew. Of course they did, we think now, of course they would if we were still eating and breathing, even if it was almost backwards, growing longer but dimmer and weaker, becoming matchstick bones skinned with tissue paper. But we hadn't seen our bodies in so long, and eventually the sickness made us forget how we'd ever moved before, so we didn't think to wonder about growing.

One of the strangest things—the dark inside the lung, the part we couldn't see, became the same dark under the bed, or at the bottom of the cellar stairs, the dark in the deep parts of the bayous we swam and bathed in, the kind of dark that's been unstirred for too long, that might hide things we've never dreamed of. We knew there was nothing behind the dull iron collar separating us at the neck, nothing inside the little glass chamber but us, but we couldn't check to be sure, and the dark and the unknowing grew so thick sometimes we felt it lying across us like a sandbag, keeping us short of breath and pressed to the bed.

When one of us died, it was usually impossible to tell just by looking. The lung's engine still huffed our breath in and out, so we looked asleep or as if we were just staring off, thinking.

When the polio came to our towns every year, as the days yawned and stretched into the full-force heat of summer, the pools and playgrounds closed, and our parents hid us inside the house all day, even when the heat that built up behind the closed windows and doors made dizzy and threatened to suffocate us. They told us to stay away from the canals and bays, they boiled all our clothes and bedding, filled our sandpits with bleach or ammonia. They fed us more beans, more carrots and collard greens, and would not let us play with our friends.

None of it changed anything, though, and one by one, the sickness found us and crawled

down our throats. Some of us fell asleep with a fever and woke up screaming. Bernie Johnson just thought it was growing cramps at first, and kept sneaking outside to play until he just fell over, and couldn't get back up. Roberta Johnson was just a baby, and couldn't tell her momma everything hurt, that she couldn't move, so until it got to her lungs and she started turning blue, her momma thought it was just a summer flu. Della Sherman lay quiet and paralyzed for hours the afternoon she got sick, surrounded by so many toys that her mother couldn't find her, and thought at first she'd been taken. Which, in a way, she was.

Some of us were older when we got sick—we could run and swim and hopscotch and skip rope and catch crawdads with long, callused fingers. We knew what it was we'd lost, now that we couldn't move. Rodney Fruget was sitting in the kitchen with his mother, and complained he felt hot and itchy before suddenly sprawling across his arithmetic exercises. Bernie Prejean was the fastest runner in his class, but collapsed when he was just walking to school. Lecia Babin got dizzy and fainted in front of her beau, while they were sharing a cup of shaved ice. He promised to come and visit her—so did all our friends—but of course, his mother wouldn't let him.

We stayed at hospitals in own towns at first, scattered all along the coast of Louisiana, and for the first few months, we all thought we would go home soon, as soon as we got better. The nurses clicked briskly along the ward, fed us pudding, washed us gently each morning. For those first few months, our mothers visited every week, braiding our hair in tight, hard rows if we were daughters, or trimming it close to our scalps if we were sons. They met other mothers there, and made friends, and sometimes they took turns all bringing in a basket of lunch between them and feeding us all, laying a pretty blanket on the hospital floor so we could have a summer picnic. Our fathers came in their Sunday best or surprised us in their uniforms if they were on leave, and called us their brave little soldiers, their sugar sweet girls. They told us exciting stories of fights at sea, of rescues from behind enemy lines, of friends they'd made out in the field who'd saved their lives, and for those

first few months, we repeated these stories to ourselves at night, imagining again and again the flash and boom of the battlefield, a brave friend waving us on, the burn of exhaustion in our legs as darted and dodged, running full-tilt into danger to save our country.

It was only after the doctors had cared for us and given us medicine, and still watched us grow sicker, more helpless, that they told our families we needed to go somewhere else, somewhere with the sort of ventilator machine that we would need. And so one by one, our families came to tell us not to be scared, that they'd come visit us real soon, to work real hard and get well soon, so we could come back home.

And then we were taken here, to this tall hospital with crackly white paint, in a town most of us didn't know.

We didn't mind that they put us up on the sixth floor, packed into the two neat rows of big metal barrels with engines attached that breathed in and out for us. It didn't occur to us then that our ward could be less than the first floor ward where the white children were, and we didn't know it was so far from our homes, or that it was strange to be there at all. In the beginning, all we thought this long hall with its high ceiling and exposed rafters looked like the inside of the big church back home, and on soft sunny days, the sweep of the engines sounded like soft-humming choir.

In the hospitals we had come from, each of us had seen many of the children with us leave the iron lung, slowly able to breathe again after just a few weeks, and eventually leave the hospital altogether, walking shaky as baby goats with a brace or a pair of long poles. Those of us who came to this sixth floor room in this second hospital had each seen this happen countless times, and when we learned how to talk to each other, we told these stories again and again, until all the other children we'd seen before grew into a single faceless kid whose weak kneed-body and bright smile

we called back to mind whenever we wondered when we could go home again.

This was long before what happened with Della Sherman, before we knew Rodney Fruget and Lecia Babin and Roberta Johnson and Bernie Prejean by name, names we repeat now to ourselves and to them like a code. Back then, we thought sure we'd follow when we were rested, like the doctors and nurses kept saying in those sweet, solemn voices. *Rest a little, now*, they'd say. *Just rest.*

So even as we began to get restless, even while Rodney Fruget cried quietly each night for his mother, we would nod and repeat it among ourselves. *Just a little longer.*

But we figured out pretty soon that this place was different. More of us came, and none of us left, the nurses here didn't sit with us, or tell us stories, or even wash our faces. They ignored us when they could, and calling for them over the noise of the lungs was impossible, just like talking to each other was. We couldn't speak loud enough to be heard above the engines filling this big room, and shouting made us dizzy. We had to breathe with the strict in and out of the machine, so we spoke in chopped sentences, like a bad play. The nurses could have pushed us closer together, but there was usually only one of them with us at a time, and they never seemed to have energy to spare for stuff like that.

Of course we grew bored, so bored we didn't know the name of the thing that filled our brains with hot, buzzing frustration, so we refused to eat, or clamped onto the spoons they held and wrenched, just to see them shout and knock the tray to the ground. We learned to spit at anything within range, and loved to see globs of slobber or vanilla pudding dripping off the starched white uniforms of the nurses.

We forgot what real quiet sounded like. The constant whine and rattle of the lung drowned our memories of cicadas at dusk, the muffled breeze in the warm nights. Some of us pretended the back and forth *ssbb* sounded like the waves on the shore. Della Sherman said it sounded like the

washing room of the big hotel where her mother worked, though we all wondered how she would know that—*your mamma never took you to work with her*, we said, *that's not allowed*. We longed for something, anything from the outside to break through the noise, and claimed sometimes we heard things from outside—a shout, a bark, even the wail of the hurricane siren and shrieking, battering wind—but we all knew it was pretend.

Many of us were too young to remember what anything else sounded like, and the wash of the engines wore away our families' voices like sandcastles.

By the time Nurse Angie came to us, her skin glowing gold, her hair smartly curled and tears for us trembling on her long lashes, it was hard to remember when we hadn't been inside the lung, and the world on the other side of the radio seemed to only be talking about the war, the war, the war. Some of our families visited every once in a while, but they couldn't come often. When we asked them, the nurses just said hush, I'm sure they'll come take you home soon, but they wouldn't tell us when, and time inside the iron lung stretched and stuck like candy, hanging just out of our reach.

On Nurse Angie's first day, we gave her the laugh, something we'd worked out to be the simplest way to torment the nurses. Lecia started cackling like a bird in the bog, and across the ward, someone else began to shriek with laughter too, until, bed by bed, we all joined, like an infection, until we were breathless and thrashing our heads side to side, trying to laugh until our bodies burst while the other nurses shouted over us, easily. We loved watching their frustration, even though it made us tired, and Bernie Prejean told those who could hear him it was making our real lungs good and big, a lot stronger. He said he figured he'd be able to run even faster when he went back to school.

But that first day, Nurse Angie just watched us with her dazzling smile, a movie star in her red lipstick. She had *ideas*. She just turned right around and told the doctor we needed more *stimulation*, a way to *communicate* with each other.

But he just gave her a wink and said he wouldn't mind a little more stimulation and communication either, "but there's no funding for that with these kids. One thing you got to understand," he said. "This is not a big hospital, and these kids are here up on the top floor for a reason, so you just do your best with what you got."

Later, we would find out that Nurse Angie knew, very well, that we were here in this long echoing hall for a reason—and she also, was here for that reason. If you'd asked her, she might have said she'd come here just for us. Of course, it would have sounded so silly to us then— there weren't that many of us, and none of us had any really interesting disease or even a really interesting sort of polio and after all, we were all going home soon. The idea that someone would have come all the way here from another state—all the way from Georgia!—just to feed us and wash us and help us use the toilet was hilarious, and when she told us, we'd all just rolled our eyes and made fun of the soft purr of her accent. We secretly thought she sounded like a movie star, but we didn't tell her that, and really, none of us knew anything about movie stars beyond the brief flashes of memory from before we came here, and of course those women were all white besides.

Nurse Angie hadn't come straight from Georgia, she told us. After she graduated from university— *you had to go to school for how long?* we'd asked her in horror—she had wanted to travel and see more places than just the flat green state where she'd grown up. The superintendent of a hospital there had been recruiting nurses from Nurse Angie's university, a place called Spelman, to work at his hospital because he had gone to her university's brother school (we giggled at that—schools being sisters and brothers, schools being separated for boys and girls— and we wondered what in

the world Georgia was like), and also one of her brothers had been working in New Orleans at the time, so she'd moved to New Orleans and worked with little kids in that big hospital.

This impressed us more than Georgia had—we knew about New Orleans, even the youngest of us. None of us had been there but Lecia Babin, once, but we knew it was a glittering, mysterious place where glamorous people went and dangerous people met them.

The week after she started caring for us, before we knew much of anything about her, and before Nurse D had even come to us at all, Nurse Angie brought in a man named Reggie. He was tall and sort of handsome, at least some of us thought, and he carried a big tool bag like a mechanic, but when she introduced him, Nurse Angie said he was an engineer, and also her beau.

“Hullo, children,” he said, grinning at us. “How are you doing today?”

The words left his mouth and echoed around him, swirling in the steady waves of breath from the bellows. *How are you, how are we, how are we, how?*

Some of us who were older thought it was a stupid question—couldn't he see how we were?—and we snickered. But some of us only repeated in wonder, *how are we?*

“Reggie wants to try something,” Nurse Angie explained. “He wants to help you all have a better time while you're here.” She smiled at him, a special, soft smile.

Reggie's set down his bag and got to work, laying out rows of short tubes and square hand mirrors, sorting out piles of metal screws and bolts and little pipes bent like elbows. All day long while he put the pieces together and took measurements of our iron lungs, nurses and doctors—more people than we'd seen in a while—walked by to look inside, some just watching for a minute, some coming in to ask him questions and say things like, “oh that's not a bad idea actually” before they went back downstairs. None of them actually spoke to us, though.

His “something” turned out to be a row of mirrors mounted above our heads and tilted in

such a way we could see the person in the lung across from us, the people beside them, and all the others down the row. After the first was done, and then the next and the next, we grew so excited our bodies could almost twitch and jump. We had been blind for so long, staring at the same iron collar and ceiling rafters all day, craning our necks to see the same two neighbors.

It took him three days to finish the mirrors and make sure they were pointed right. When he finished, we thanked him over and over. Nurse Angie led us in singing *Must Jesus Bear His Cross Alone* for him, and not one of us even lisped Christ's name.

In the mirrors, we came alive. We twisted and scrunched our faces until we could be strangers, we learned how talk almost through expression alone. We blinked at each other in basic code, and out of that we grew a language, blinking and winking and silently mouthing words until we were sharing our thoughts just as fast as we thought them and not getting dizzy from talking.

In the mirrors, we told each other as much about the world outside as we could remember, or even imagine. We talked about what we would do first when we got out—Bernie said he couldn't wait to go to the pool with his friends again, to see if he could still swim fast and hold his breath for two minutes. Roberta said she couldn't wait to have real ice cream from the pretty shop down the street for the first time. Lecia swore she would walk straight up to her beau and kiss him on the mouth, make him swoon like a girl. We giggled whenever she talked like this, and imagined our lips touching other lips, or a cheek, a chip of ice—anything but the spoon that fed us twice a day. Rodney just wanted to kiss his mother goodnight again, and even though we laughed at him and called him a baby, a momma's boy, we had to admit, we wanted that too.

Once a week, we were taken out of the lung to be bathed. It was hard to look at each other, at ourselves, when we were unthreaded from our lung. We tried not to think of before we came here,

when we would catch snails in the wet grass and salt them, and then pull their shriveled, gummy lengths from their shells, but that's what it is. But we did think of them, and we felt sorry for what we'd done to those snails.

We were so used to seeing each other as dark heads poking out from the armor of our giant barrel lungs that our real bodies made us feel dirty, like we'd had our pants yanked off, though no one ever laughed. The pajamas we all wore were made from soft, sand-colored fabric, fit loose to keep from getting sores, and some of us thought that we looked like dolls without their stiff, fancy clothes—large plastic heads sewn to limp cloth bodies, floppy and heavy with sand.

Those of us who were older were afraid that maybe our bodies had become deformed and Nurse Angie just wasn't telling us. We'd been that way for so long that it was hard to tell if that was true, or if it only seemed that way because we were afraid of it happening.

Some of us could move the tiniest bit—Roberta Johnson could move her feet, just barely, though she hadn't learned to walk yet. All of us could move our heads, of course, and most of us, if we forgot ourselves a moment of panic or excitement, we might see our elbow or hand twitch open and shut, easy to miss. Della Sherman could bend her knees all by herself and still move her arms some, but for some reason she didn't care about it as much as we did, so we didn't find out until later.

One thing we hated—the way our chests ached every time the machine forced in a breath. Of course we got used to it, but every once in a while, when we remembered that it hurt, we tried to seal our mouths shut, folding our lips inside our teeth, though it never worked. We grew so frustrated that we chewed our cheeks and bit our tongues. That hurt too, but at least we could choose to do it.

The night Rodney Fruget died, he started crying in the dark just as we were drifting off to sleep. He did this every night, and if you had asked, many of us would have said we waited for it, like we needed to hear it to drift off to sleep. But that night, one of us began to cry back at him, loud, mocking sobs, and one by one, we all joined in. The night nurse shouted for us to stop, but we closed our eyes and mouths when she came near, so the sound stayed just out of her reach in the dark. After a bit, she gave up and pretended to not hear us.

Rodney tried to cry softer, but we could still hear him in the spaces between the engine's noise.

Why are you crying, one of us close blinked at him. *Why are you crying, why are you crying*, all of our faces echoed in the mirror.

I want my mom, he said. *I just want my mom, I miss her.*

She hasn't come to see you in AGES, one of us said.

She missed your birthday, another of us added, snickering. *And the one before that, and the one before that and—*

"I want to go home!" Rodney said, as loud as he could, and gasped a little when his lung inhaled. "Why can't we go home already?"

Home? some of us said, like the word was strange to us.

Maybe we were mad because he still cried for his mother, and most days, we forgot to think of ours. Maybe one of us whispered *your mother forgot you*. Maybe someone finally said it—*maybe no one is ever coming to get you*. If you'd asked us, we would have said we didn't mean, that we didn't really think that, but if we were honest, anything we'd said to Rodney we'd thought first for ourselves.

Some of us kept after Rodney, but most of us fell silent. Most of us fell asleep. But those of us placed closest to him watched in the mirror while tears and snot trickled down and dried because he couldn't wipe them away, and then we saw when the muscles in his jaw went slack. His eyes had

been squeezed shut while he cried, but as his face softened, his eyelids drew slowly back until he stared calmly up at the rafters. He looked as if he was thinking about what to say, but his complete stillness scared us, and we thought to ourselves, *I'll just count to one hundred and then if he hasn't moved or closed his mouth, I'll call for the nurse*, and we counted, and counted again and again, until we drifted off in our own chambers, to a shaky, uneasy sleep,

Rodney lay the whole night in his soiled little chamber while the night nurse slept through her rounds, as his lung pushed air in and out just like real breathing. When the morning nurse brought his breakfast the next morning, she screamed and dropped the bowl, which, strangest thing, only rolled across the floor on its side, nearly completing a circle before it tipped over, but did not shatter.

One of the worst things—how quickly a new one of us appeared in an empty lung, whose endless pumping was too efficient to waste.

Nurse Angie insisted the night nurse be fired for letting Rodney die.

“It’s the entire reason you’re here,” she’d shouted at her, “the only thing you had to do was watch over them at night, and you couldn’t even stay awake? This little boy died, gasping and struggling and so, so scared, because you couldn’t be troubled to do your job.”

We knew this was probably unfair, but watching Nurse Angie, the most dependable adult we had, exploding into sparks and fire and telling this woman it was her fault made us forget the way we’d taunted him, something we were certain had somehow caused his death. After the girl ran away in tears, it seemed almost like Nurse Angie had saved us from dying like Rodney simply by showing us whose fault it was, really, and then sending her away.

And that night, Nurse DeMoneaux appeared, drifting up and down the ward with her bare feet, carrying her lamp. Her hair was shaved close and soft like lamb's fleece, and because of this her eyes seemed larger and darker in her bare face than any we'd seen before, flashing in the dark when she moved her light. She drifted by, her lamp a dim glare in our eyes, and she seemed surprised whenever she saw us awake.

"Y'all's little bodies need rest now," she says, shaking her head. "So go to sleep, go on. You can't get better if you never sleep."

But we don't want to, we told her. We slept so much throughout the day, trying to escape the repetition—the same breakfast, the same hymns Nurse Angie teaches us, the same alphabet and number lessons, the same few stories we tell each other, the same few faces staring, bored, into our own from above, so that at night we lay wide-awake and jumpy in the dark, trying to hear anything besides the whoosh of the machines.

"Hmmm," she said, drawing out the hum of it behind her pressed lips until we all felt a laugh crawling up our throats. "Hmm. Sounds like y'all children are about to start rippin' out your own brains through your nose from being so bored."

Yes, we told her, it was that. This boredom. It was more, we knew, but none of us wanted to tell this new nurse how long it had been since we'd seen our mother last, how long since we'd heard our daddy laugh so hard he coughed on his own spit.

"You children just need something to keep you occupied."

We begged her to tell us a ghost story, or show us a card trick, to play the radio or read us anything but the large floppy Bible Nurse Angie kept here.

But instead, she said she had something better. "Y'all just missing the world out there, that's wrong. Your minds need to eat too, and they can't grow just by doing lessons and listening to

stories.”

We all lay very still, listening. That was it, that was what we wanted, but we didn't know when we would finally get to leave.

“Now when I was girl,” Nurse D said “my grandmother taught me some special things. She said a body's spirit stays put inside it 'til the body dies, but when we go to sleep, it's almost the same thing and if you practice, you can get your spirit to fly out and see the world and all the lovely things out there while your body stays behind.”

And she told us to close our eyes, and talked us into a soft haze, until we felt our eyelids closing, something in us becoming light. She taught us how to push ourselves out into the air and stretch the silvery thread that connects us to our bodies, a long shimmering strand, delicate as a lock of hair that she taught us to see by letting our minds still and only looking at it from the side of our eyes.

And one by one that night, like we would every night after, we floated up out of our own mouths with a sound like breath escaping, a bubble breaking silently from our slackened lips and we looked down to see our bodies empty and asleep.

That first night, we were too timid, too nervous to do much more than cling together and drift along behind Nurse D as she lead us out to ground around the hospital, turned a strange, lurid green and white silver in the moonlight. Everything looked different than we remembered—the shadows darker, the colors more opaque—and though the grounds were silent, even just the rustle of air in the trees felt as if we had turned a corner into a room where a radio sat, blaring at its highest volume.

Later, when we woke in the morning and talked about the night before together, each of us so relieved to find out it had happened, really, we hadn't only dreamed it ourselves, we decided the

world outside had felt so strange because we'd been inside this sixth-floor room for so long, staring at nothing but white walls and a dark, dusty ceiling and our own faces in the mirrors, and had heard nothing but the wheeze of the lungs and our own thin voices. We relived the short trip outside over and over, reminding each other how the grass had felt, how the air had smelled, blinking and clicking in our secret language so Nurse Angie couldn't hear because even then we knew she would never allow it, that she might make this new nurse leave us too, and we were so afraid to lose this door we had finally opened.

We were so excited about the dreaming that morning that we didn't even notice the change in our mirrors at first—sometime during the night they had been adjusted, turned just the tiniest bit to reflect into the other mirrors at every angle, so that instead of just the children close to us, each of us could see everyone, all the faces in the room stretching away forever, smaller and smaller into the darkening space. From that morning on, as soon as our eyes opened in the light, we joined our hundreds and hundreds of selves.

Our lives were still a train of identical days, each carrying the same expectations and experiences as the one before it, but we weren't bored anymore: during the day, we had our mirrors and secret language conversations, our lessons and stories from Nurse Angie, who would sometimes read us fairy tales if we begged her, though she still said the Bible was the best thing our little minds

Each morning, she would wake us up singing and we would climb back into our bodies, blink hello to each other, and open our mouths to be fed when it was our turn, after we'd recited whatever lesson we'd learned the day before. She would read to us, or tell us stories from when she was a little girl, then make us practice our letters and numbers, spelling and arithmetic.

At night, once we got brave enough to leave the hospital grounds, we explored the town and

marsh around it, we flew across the water, smacking our toes against the surface. We chased cats in the dark and hissed back at possums whenever we saw their eyes shining at us from the trees and tops of fences, delighted when we saw them jump and fumble to keep their grip. We peeked in windows, bobbed in the marsh like bogwights, hooting and giggling in the dark and sometimes, when we yelled loud enough, we could catch the attention of some teenaged boy hiking out in the marsh, a girl come down to her kitchen for a snack, little kids in their beds who sat up and said *who is it, who's calling*, and woke up their parents in their terror.

We crept into ice cream parlors that were closed for the night, and though of course we couldn't eat any of it, we found that just inhaling the cold vapor that rose off our favorite flavor was enough to bring back the memory of ice cream we'd eaten in our lives before so sharp that it felt like we were eating it again.

We found it took a long time to get anywhere we hadn't been before, even though we could fly back to the hospital fast. Nurse D said it took a lot of practice to stretch the silvery thread that kept us tied to our sleeping bodies, and that familiar places were easier to get to.

"And you have to be careful," she told us. "Make sure you always, always remember your way back."

We asked her if, when we got better and left the hospital, we could still go flying at night and see each other in our real lives, she smiled and said "we'll just have to see, won't we".

Some nights as we flew, the dream would get away from us and we would fall, the air whistling in our ears. We'd jolt back into our bodies, and for a moment, feel as though our dead limbs had moved.

Some of the things we'd forgotten and got back through the dreaming—the muddy taste of the catfish our fathers would bring home on Friday nights for our mothers to fry; the sharp brine of

bayou water we accidentally snorted up our noses while we swam; the curving track of a gator's tail in the mud, a sight that had so frightened and excited one of us that she decided to keep it for herself and not to tell her mother or siblings or any of her friends.

Some of us were too young to remember much of our lives before, so going out into the world, exploring the town around our hospital slowly, inch by inch, was completely new to us, and we were happy to follow after the others and listen to their memories.

Della was one of us who should have been too young to have lots of memories, but she still told us about the apple pie her momma would bring home some days for dinner if she'd been good, the big tin bathtub she'd bathed in, her momma scratching the mud out of her hair with her short fingernails, the stiff, pretty dresses she and her momma would put on to walk up and down the main street on Sundays, how they would stop at the edge of the cemetery park for a purple popsicle and walk through the rows of headstones to the old section with the big stone buildings and tall statues of blank-eyed angels.

But where did you live? we'd ask. Where did your momma go during the day?

But Della never could remember the specifics, not the locations of things, or even their names. Just feelings, pictures, impressions. If you'd asked us, we'd say that the only reason we could think that Della might not be making all that stuff up is that she never made up a daddy to go with it, it was always just her and her momma, and she wasn't touchy about it either, never acted like it bothered her that she couldn't remember him. *Maybe I never had one*, she would say with a little unconcerned twitch of the head, and those of us who were older would wonder how she could be so careless about it.

Of course, as soon as we had practiced the dreaming enough that we thought we could leave the town, we decided we should go to our houses and see our families. Even so, it took several

weeks for us to work up the nerve to do it. We hadn't seen our families in so long, and even though we knew they wouldn't be able to see us, even though we knew there would be no way to test whether they remembered us or not, we felt suddenly shy, and knowing we would take the rest of us along made each of us wonder—*will it really be how I remember? Will it be just as good as everyone else's?*

We had encountered people there on the hospital grounds, and though at first we shrank away and hid, we were children still, and we wanted to see what mischief we could cause, to see just how far we could reach into this world. If we drifted across the path of a grown up, some absent-minded doctor or tired-eyed nurse leaving for the night or stumbling in for their shift, they might step around us without really seeing us, or wipe at their faces or neck as though they'd walked through a spider web. If we rushed through the leaves of the pecan and crepe myrtle trees along the path, rattling the branches like wind, they might turn, and watch the leaves scatter and fall to the ground but wouldn't look back up to see who knocked them down. If we floated behind them and said something or, once, shrieked as loud as we could, they might jump, but shrug when they saw nothing and seem to forget that a moment ago something startled them.

Children were different, we found. We avoided the ones we thought were very sick, or hurt real bad, but we tested our new freedom on the other children stuck in iron lungs downstairs, thinking that if they could see us, and hear us when we spoke, we might teach them to escape it too. And, though none of us had to admit it, we were curious about them too—would they be just as restless too? Did they have lessons the same as us? Were they fed the same grits every morning with same tin spoon?

When we crept into the other long room of iron lungs downstairs, we expected them to be like the adults we'd come across—not really seeing us, just having a weird feeling that *something* was there. We came through the door and saw their heads poking out of their barrel lungs, turning from side to side, their hair rustling on the pillowcase. We edged around the corners at first, then floated

across the empty space to hang above them.

The moment seemed to skid and grind to a halt. We stared into their faces—real faces, children we didn't recognize that were not the reflection of a someone across the room but rather people alive and directly beneath us— and they saw us, somehow, and first one screamed, and across the ward other eyes snapped open and looked up, and they screamed too, and though we scattered and fled, we could hear them screaming still as we raced away across the hospital lawn.

In reality, they frightened us too, with their pale eyes wide in the dark, their mouths gaping open and black beneath us, and the surprising fear we felt made us itchy with anger, and something in us twisted and clenched, and we began to sneak up on them, to blow in their ears when they were in that middle place between sleep and awake, the sort of place we felt we lived in now. We loved to crowd together and barrel down the aisle over their heads, and though they woke with a start and screamed together, like we had once, and though they started telling stories about ghosts living in our hospital, the only proof their nurses could see was how their limp hair blew up from their faces to wave for a moment in the air.

When we looked at each other when we were out in the dreams, we saw ourselves, just as we expected to, but it was also just a shimmer of ourselves, a shadow turning away into the thicker dark of the night, the outline of a person at our shoulder that grew dimmer and harder to see if we turned and looked straight on. We found we couldn't focus too hard on the our edges—our fingers, our clouds of wispy hair (since Nurse Angie didn't have the time to shave or braid our hair for us), the hems of our clothing—or whoever we stared at slipped out of our grasp and trailed out of sight, and we forgot what we'd been looking at.

Was it like this for the other children who saw us? Was it just their sleepy confusion that made them see ghosts instead of us? We wondered if we met them now, in real life, in the daylight, if we

would catch a flash of this same scared dislike in their faces before they hid it away. Maybe it had always been there, and we just hadn't known to look.

Some days, if we could curl into our dreaming sleep in time, we followed Nurse Angie as she left the hospital, walking out humid, buzzing air of the town. Most days, she walked straight to the apartment building where she lived—*was is her home*, we wondered, *if she lived there alone, with no husband and no mother and father and family?*—only stopping at the grocery or, sometimes, the florist's, where she would buy a fistful of daisies or white carnations, whatever was cheapest that day. We wished we could pick her the flowers we saw when we flew out into the marsh nearby—flowers large and candy colored, almost glowing in the dark, with long dangling petals that felt thick and springy beneath our fingers, like rubber—but at first, anything we tried to grasp only slipped through our fingers. Even when we learned, almost by accident, that we could gather our concentration and actually touch things in the real world, moving them, when we went out dreaming, we realized could never have explained how we got those flowers for her anyway.

If the next day was Friday or Sunday, which were her days off, sometimes she would go to a theatre on the far side of town where they let anyone sit in the same room for many of the movies, and she would always choose the romance, and during the heart-rending scenes, or those with excitement or danger, she would watch with her little white glove over her mouth, as if she thought she might shout and disturb the people around her.

We loved seeing her like this, when she became a different person—just Angie, without the Nurse. We loved watching the people around her or walking past her react to her movie-star smile, her brisk step and bouncing hair. Even the white men would glance at her from under the bill of her hat, and we watched her smile at every uniformed man she saw, colored or not, and watched their eyes widen and mouths droop open in the second of surprise that a woman so lovely could be

smiling at them that way.

More than once, when we seeped into her apartment, as still and quiet as we could be, we found her sitting at her little kitchen table with several candles melting around her. *Doesn't she have electricity*, we thought, though we knew of course she did. Maybe she only liked candlelight better, even if we couldn't imagine how that could be.

What is she reading, we wondered. A few of us could read too, but we couldn't see the cover of the book, and something in the way Angie glanced up nervously whenever we moved made us sure that if we got close enough to peer over her shoulder she would know we were there and find out about the dreaming. The man and women hadn't been able to see us, we thought, but they'd know we were there. So instead we imagined her reading the romance novels some of our mothers would get at the drugstore and read next to the city pool while we swam in the summer, or gulp in snatches while dinner was simmering.

Lecia told us her mother had started taking in ironing when her father left for the war, and she would have Lecia sit next to her and read out loud after supper while she grunted and pressed at her ironing board. Lecia told us there were dirty parts in those books, and somehow her mama always knew when one was coming up, because she'd stop Lecia, and take the book, folding the corners of a few pages over, then having her start again with the next chapter. She didn't know why her mama folded the pages, she said, but it made it easy for Lecia to go back and find the dirty parts when her mother was out, so that she knew things about what men and women did alone together that none of us had ever heard of.

We couldn't imagine our Nurse Angie, with her love of church and proper way of dressing and speaking reading dirty books like that, but one night when we found her up reading in her nightie, we heard a man's voice from the other room, telling her to put that light out already and come back

to bed. We looked at each other in shock, but she just smiled, and folded the top of her page too, and blew out her candles.

And then one day, she brought a book in, and it wasn't a romance novel at all. She told us it was by a woman named Sister Kenny, who was Catholic, and not even American, but also was a nurse who had written a book about children who had the same disease as us, infantile paralysis. This lady, she told us, knew a way to treat the sickness we'd all got that kept us from breathing or moving on our own. Her book talked about all the things we should be doing so that we could get better, and be able to stand and move again, so we could leave the hospital finally and go back to our real lives.

We grinned, almost humming with excitement, and after lunch every day, she began to pull us out of our lungs and help us practice breathing on our own. After a few minutes of helping us take deep breaths, she'd pick up our legs, our arms, and move them in a slow, jerky dance, back and forth, and then ask us to push against her movement as hard as we could. *Exercises*, she called them, and we wrinkled our noses at the word that sounded silly in our mouths.

Our limbs grew swollen with the movement at first, especially around our elbows and knees and ankles, joints we'd almost forgotten we'd had. Our skin turned a little purple, too, and we giggled when we saw each other. When we were done, she would wrap our arms and legs in hot, wet towels she had to go get from downstairs, and it helped make our muscles hurt less.

Because he begged her to, she would start with Bernie Prejean, and come back to him at the end too, so he could practice twice. Every day, we would all watch as he scrunched up his face in concentration, gasping shallow breaths, and try to move his legs on his own, just an inch. Every day, Nurse Angie would grab his shoulder and shake it a little, saying "good, good, just keep trying. You'll get there. You're so close!"

Each time we did well, Nurse Angie would just grin and grin, rub our heads or smooth our hair, and we felt guilty when we wished, just for a second, that she could be our mother. Ours were still out there, we knew, waiting for us to get better, to come back.

When we finally did go out to see our homes, it took several tries before we found the first. Only one of us was actually from the city, so we went to his house first. He had only been six or so when he was brought to the hospital, and couldn't quite remember the way. We would be heading in one direction, crowding too close to each other, and suddenly a building farther up would look familiar and he'd rush ahead to it, the rest of us close behind, but then it would change as we got closer, and we'd have to turn and go back the way we'd come. We got more and more confused—*everything looks so different at night*, he told us— and though we could feel Nurse D watching us, and knew nothing could actually hurt us, the strange empty streets and the twisted shadows the few street lamps threw across our paths made us nervous, skittish like rabbits, until finally, one of the familiar streets turned out to be the right one, and he lead us to a house—a squat, plain house, like all the others on that street— and announced *This is it, I found it*.

Once inside, we wandered in huddles still, politely looking at the table shoved in the corner, the neat little kitchen with dishes drying in the rack, the sofa in the living room that looked new and barely used, and he stared and bit his lip and turned in place. *I thought*— he whispered and even we could barely hear him. *I thought this was my house?*

Isn't it? we said.

But it looks— and he didn't have to finish. Of course it would look different, even at that age, we knew our memory, grown stagnant and muddy from so long spent in the same room, would fool us when given the chance.

Let's find out. Let's wake them up, we whispered, *we should wake them up*.

Some of us agreed, and some of us said no, we shouldn't be found, and some of us said it was the only way to be sure. He ignored us, and went into the kitchen and found a mark he'd made in the wall, one he remembered so well because he'd been whipped hard for throwing a table knife at his brother, but even then, even when he was sure, we suddenly wanted to wake them, just to see if we could, and *don't you want to see your momma and daddy again?*

And we kept arguing in whispers until THUMP— one of us knocked a book out of the tall standing shelf next to the sofa. We all stared, surprised, even the one who had done it. Always before when we'd tried to pick things up it had slipped through our fingers, but the one who had pushed the book showed us how to focus on the edge of it, push it real hard and THUD, *clump*, we joined in, knocking them down one by one, until we heard a voice in the closed bedroom and the door opened and a man came out, a woman hiding behind him.

We stared. The boy who had lived here knew, and we knew, just by looking—these were people he'd never seen before.

He faltered, wheeled around, suddenly confused. *Those aren't my parents?*

Always, in the times came later, as this happened again and again, we said this as a question, one we knew none of us could answer.

So he panicked and raced back to the kitchen to check for his mark and we followed, making each other more and more upset until we rushed around the house as the strangers stood in the middle of it—following him as he looked for, and found, more and more signs that said yes, it's true, this was the house where he'd grown up. The noise of us, the whispering, the little half-choked cries, the shouts of finding another mark or scar in the walls or floors or windowsills, scared the new people there, and as we grew more excited and upset, we found we could mass together and push over the whole rickety shelf over as they watched, that we could knock framed pictures of people that were not his real family off the walls, make dishes fall from the drying rack and shatter, the

noise sharp and angry like we were. When we were finished, the man and the woman stood out in their yard, staring back at the house, their pale, terrified faces a mirror of the children in the ward below ours, but this time, as we drifted, spent, back to the hospital, we thought of that terror, and smiled.

After that, we went to other places we remembered, to see what we could find of our old lives, and if they were places that hadn't been open to us before, they were ours now at night.

Once we flew to the elementary one of us had gone to, and drifted through the silent rooms. She'd been one of those kids who loved coming to school, who was every teacher's pet, but she couldn't find her name in any of the poems and crayon drawings tacked on the walls. She found her old desk, but someone had scratched out the heart and her initials she'd carved on top until she could barely read it. She whispered, *I haven't been gone that long, right?* And in her panic, which we shared, we tore around until all the gold-starred drawings and essays fluttered off the walls, knocking all the books on the shelf to the floor where they lay splay-paged like dead birds. If we helped each other, we found we could tip the desks over and we tipped every one except the one that used to be hers. We hadn't meant to make the mess at first, but when we were done we felt better, and the one of us who had gone there smiled and said, *there, now they won't forget me that easy.*

Once, we found a candy shop that one of us remembered, that had never let him even come inside because he wasn't white, and after a few minutes of trying, we found we could shatter the glass in every one of the long display cases, scattering bright jawbreakers and lollipop and licorice bites on the floor like marbles. We visited movie theaters that had kept us out and jammed the projector, tangling and snarling the shiny ribbon that fed through it. We raced across old playgrounds and pushed the swings on their long chains, howling at the top of the jungle gym, raking our names in the gravel or dirt for people to read the next day.

When we visited our other homes, and found them changed too, we made as the loudest noise and biggest mess we could, and still it wasn't enough.

Things we wanted, as the air started warming and the birds outside the high windows got louder, more numerous—cake, cold potato salad, buttered toast with cinnamon, our aunt's gumbo. To walk barefoot in the grass and plaster our knees with mud. To stand at the front of church and sing our solo in our best clothes on Easter Morning. To stand thigh-deep in a muddy pond and listen to bellow of gators far out in the marsh, watch the sand cranes flap up like they were yanked by a string.

Lecia wanted to go back to school, back to her friends and her books and her smartly packed lunches.

Bernie still wanted to be an Olympic sprinter. The next Jesse Owens.

Della said she wanted to go to school to be a nurse, just like our Nurse Angie, with red lipstick and a bright white uniform, but we were sure she only said that, just to be contrary, on the days Nurse Angie made us mad.

Roberta was almost a baby when she came here, so she probably couldn't have told you what she wanted. She didn't know enough about outside to feel anything other than a little wanting, like a shrug, and she probably wouldn't have even said she wanted to leave.

All of us, even though we had made fun of Rodney Fruget, wanted our mothers.

When we looked for her though, we only found empty streets and houses with other people in them, and we wondered, *was my mother ever real? Did I dream her up?* Maybe some of us wondered, as we broke the flower petals and leaves out of the new delicate lead-glass window in our old house, the glass bursting out to sparkle on the lawn where we had played before, *will she come back here if I*

make enough noise?

Nurse Angie wanted her family back too—because she'd gone to fancy women's college in another city from where she grew up, and because she'd gotten a job in New Orleans at that special hospital after she finally finished school, she hadn't seen her family for almost as long as us.

She told us she had been the first of her family to keep going to school past grade five or so—her four brothers had dropped out in order to take jobs. The way Angie looked when she spoke about them, like they were the heroes of a fairytale, probably wouldn't have seemed too different to anyone watching who didn't know her, but we could see the ease come back into her smile, when it had been stretched tight and set firmly in place a moment before. We could see the mist she was careful to blink away right as it started to gather, and maybe we felt a little stab of annoyance that there could be anyone more important to her than us. But those of us who had sisters missed them terribly and wished it could be them rubbing our hair at night, *shushing* us to sleep, and those of us who had brothers let ourselves imagine, secretly, that one day they would come galloping in through the doorway and run down the aisles between our lungs, cackling and hooting until they found us, pulled us out of the lung and carted us away piggy-back.

Maybe it had been even longer since Nurse Angie had seen her family than we'd seen ours, so we reminded each other that we understood when she babbled on about one brother fixing the mayor's motorcar the just an hour before the Fourth of July parade, or another in the war who had written from France, telling her about the fancy women in Paris and the promising to bring her home some perfume called *Shannelle* when the war was over.

She told us once that the only reason she'd gotten to become a nurse was because of her brothers. Her momma and daddy had wanted all of their children to get educated, and maybe even

be doctors or lawyers or politicians, and she said they would have worked their hands to the bone and kept going 'til their eyes dropped out from pure tiredness to keep us all in school so their kids could be something great.

“But they weren’t dumb,” she said. “They knew it was gonna be too much to ask three young, headstrong boys to keep going to school and listening to old, grumbly teachers when all their friends quit and got jobs, got some spending money, got to be men. They thought, how we gonna tell them, *no you stay at that desk and eat that lard sandwich for lunch and pretend you don’t care that other kids at school got more food and better clothes, that your teacher just stares like an old dog whenever you got something to say*, when all the other boys coming home with grease on their hands and money in their pockets.”

So what they’d done was strike a deal— they’d let each of their boys stop attending school, helped them search for jobs in the want ads and with the respectable people who held Angie’s daddy in high regard, and in exchange, he still had to live at home 'til he was seventeen, he couldn’t go gambling or drinking, and he had to drop part of his wages each month into the coffee tin to help save up for the educational future of the siblings younger than him.

This arrangement worked out good—Angie said her parents had raised fine, respectful boys after all, and just the joy of having a job, doing real work each day and finding it interesting even, plus the sort of satisfaction that only comes from the combination of that pleasant soreness in your muscles and the money it put in your pocket, was enough to keep the boys content, and eventually, when the fourth brother, the one with the soft voice and the rare bright smile, had found a job unpacking and arranging the fruits and vegetables at the local grocers, Angie was the only one with her name on that coffee tin. The brothers didn’t mind—they knew Angie liked school in a way they never had, and they knew she was the best one to carry their parents’ dreams of going to university and doing something big with herself, even if she was a girl.

The day she got accepted to nursing school, she told us, one of her brothers, the funny one

who could draw anything, the clown who had always been getting his hands willow-switched when he'd been at school, who traveled now with a big carnival fixing their rides and taking care of their show ponies, had finally given her the a portrait of her he'd been working on for weeks but hadn't let her see. She unwrapped it and found a painting of herself wearing the frumpy headdress and flat, middle-parted hair and dour grimace of Florence Nightingale. Her brothers had all bust out laughing, of course, and she had too after a moment, though their mother *tsk'*ed her tongue over such a waste of fine paint. But it was beautiful, she said, in way—the soft fading of the colors in the background, the way he'd captured the light on her skin and the shine in her eyes, even if she was scowling.

“Don't worry, little girl,” he'd said patting her head like a puppy's. “You pretty enough without needing some silly picture of mine telling you so.”

She'd shaken his hand off and said pretty wasn't the point, since she wasn't going to school to meet a man, not that there'd be any at Spelman anyways, since it was only a women's school.

Her brothers only smiled, and said pretty never had to be the point, but it was nice just the same.

“But who's Florence Nightingale?” we asked. “Who did he draw you like?”

She'd brought in a picture of her the next day—not her brother's picture, but one of Ms. Nightingale, a real one—and told us all about the lady who had taken care of those soldiers during a war that had happened before the war that was happening now, one hadn't even happened here in her own country.

“Ladies weren't really allowed to be nurses back then,” Nurse Angie said, “so she changed everything for women like me. When I was a little girl, she was my hero.”

We tried to look interested, but most of us couldn't imagine getting better with this mean-

looking white lady standing over us. We were glad we'd gotten Nurse Angie and Nurse D instead.

Angie showed us another picture of her walking around in the dark holding a lamp high up next to her head.

"See? She was famous for walking around and around every night with her little oil lamp, keeping watch over the sick men in their beds, bringing them water, talking to them. They called her the Lady of the Lamp."

"Oh," some of us said. "Just like Nurse D"

We didn't understand why, but Nurse Angie frowned and shook her head and turned away with the pictures to pack them back in her bag.

"No, she was not anything like that night nurse. They just both have a lamp, that's all."

The meanness in her voice surprised us, and we wondered why Angie, who was so kind to us and worked so hard and smiled so much, wouldn't like someone like Nurse D. We thought it was unfair, and just like that, we began to watch and see what else Nurse Angie would do wrong.

One thing we couldn't agree on—what dreaming your own death feels like.

Roberta said it felt like a flash of heat, and then everything gone cold.

Lecia said it felt like when you ride the big carnival ride, the kind that's like a big rowboat swinging back and forth, higher and higher, until your stomach flutters up into your throat and you forget how to breath.

When Bernie died in his dream, he got crushed under a train. He said it's a feeling like the breath's been knocked out of you, a tight, gasping feeling, which of course sounded so strange. He was older—he'd felt something like that before, when a kickball had hit him smack in the stomach—but we didn't understand, we couldn't stop breathing even if we wanted to.

Della said it was a slow falling, sinking feeling, not like when we were jolted out of sleep, not

as if we were actually falling from a height, but slowing slipping under, floating weightless in warm water. While the rest of us wandered around, exploring or looking for our families, trying to leave traces of ourselves with the messes we made, Della tried to dream her death every night, tossing herself into the bay, looking for the tallest buildings to curl up and drop from, pestering alligators and water moccasins. She said it felt so weird, more fun than just doing the same stuff every night, and we tried not to see her disappointment each morning when she woke up alive, in her real body.

Della was one of us who came to hospital young, who didn't have as many memories to miss as some of us did, so at first, she was one of us who, though you still couldn't use the word *happy*, was at least mostly content.

But then Nurse D came and taught us how to sneak back into the world we'd been shut away from, and Della got to see the same things we remembered, and she changed. She didn't become like one of us who were older—crying on our birthdays, feeling sorry for ourselves, fighting to remember things the way they were when we lived out there, not the too-bright version we saw now, colors like paint smeared on too thick. She didn't become like Roberta Johnson, who was almost a baby when she was put inside the lung, who liked to catch insects and birds at night and pull off their legs and wings—not because she wanted to see them hurt, but because she didn't understand what pain was, she didn't know what it was like to be part of a body that could move and stretch and run, and curl up at the end of the day and sleep.

Instead, Della seemed to float farther and farther away from the world we traveled through—she still dreamed with us, and still talked about her life before, but her face when she told the stories about her mother looked the same as when she watched us talking about our own mothers—interested, and a little surprised. She didn't talk about the things she would do when she got out of the lung and back to real life. She didn't try to conjure up the tastes of all her favorite foods like we

did; she didn't lead us all on wild goose chases trying to find her house and her mother like we all did, though maybe that's because she learned better from watching us fail.

As summer came again, and none of us had left the lung, still, Nurse Angie's perky happiness began to make us itchy and hot with anger. Some days we fell back into tormenting her, though she was always the same, so kind and happy and sweet with us every day, working with us on our exercises, reading to us even though we pretend-snoored over her voice as she read us stories about prophets and apostles. When she did our lessons, we mispronounced vowels we all knew, slurred through the alphabet song, added when we were meant to subtract, and snickered at her frustration.

"Maybe you should teach us better," we said, but she would just smile sadly, and agree with us.

We still gave her the laugh, but we also started singing the hymns she was always trying to get us to practice. Only one of us would sing at a time, for just one word, holding the note until the next breath in, so another child would sing the next word, slowing the song down to a third its normal speed, keeping time in the mirror. Sometimes she would just smile and pretend to ignore us, but other times she ran along the ward, covering our mouths with both hands, calling us blasphemous, but there were always more mouths than she could cover up.

Some days we tried to laugh until our bodies burst or we became tired. Once, Della laughed and laughed until she fainted, and that just started the whole wave again. Another time, Lecia, who was knew about sex, asked her a dirty question about Reggie, her engineer. We watched her eyes flash wide in the mirrors, like Lecia had slapped her, like her question had hurt, but she didn't respond.

But more than anything, Nurse Angie hated when we told her about the dreams. We didn't tell her about the *real* dreams—that we could actually leave and go out in the world, that we could touch things and smash things and scare people, real people, that Nurse D had given us a door to the

outside again. We were afraid she would somehow take it all away.

But we told her about *some* dreams, just pretending they were something our minds gave us when we were asleep. First one of us would tell her while she was feeding us breakfast that we dreamed we lived inside a web worm's hazy nest, or saw fish leaping in the bayou, or went with our families to a party with an endless table of ham and potatoes au gratin, fried okra, fresh coconut cake. By the time she reached the last of us, we had all described the same scene with little variation—each of us blinking our eyes steadily, speaking soft, urgent tones. She acted like our dreams interested her a little—*how funny*, she'd say, *you are all so much alike*—but something in the way she chewed the inside of her cheek and drew her shoulders up around her ears told us she did not like it. We saw this, and something in us was pleased.

The first time Della told her about one of her death dreams, Angie frowned and checked her temperature and said she was sorry Della had had a nightmare. But when she described them again and again, dragging her feet through the details and grinning, like it was the most delicious thing she'd ever felt, Angie got more upset, said no one should think about dying that way, even if it was just in a dream, that only God knew each of our times and places, and finally one morning, when Della started to tell her, Nurse Angie knocked the spoon off the tray in her lap, flinging grits across the sheets in her haste to cover her mouth.

None of us quite understood how Della could be so interested in dying, since it was something we all knew was bad but seemed so far away, like we would always be out of reach here, in our big empty hall on the sixth floor, so close to the sky and hidden away where no one but the nurses even seemed to know where to find us. We didn't understand it, but Nurse Angie saw something in Della's stories that scared her, and we thrilled to think that perfect, smiling Nurse Angie could be afraid of anything.

She asked once or twice if the night nurse was putting these weird ideas of dreams in our

heads, telling us scary stories while we fell asleep at night. We said no, no we loved Nurse D's stories about all the lovely things out in the world, she'd never try to scare us, Nurse D was amazing, Nurse Angie only squinted at us a little, and said alright then, but we should tell her if something ever bothered us.

And then Della Sherman left us, but she didn't die.

One morning—how long had we been here? Long enough that none of us wondered when our parents would come to visit anymore—some white men in long white jackets came upstairs and told Nurse Angie they were there to test us. There was a doctor from downstairs, one of the men who would look in every now and then to check on us, and Nurse Angie looked at him, her face in a sort of confusion none of us had seen before.

He smiled at her, like a father. "Ms. Johnson," he said. "These men are from Charity hospital, in New Orleans. They're going to test the children here to see if any of them would benefit from a special rehabilitation program they're starting."

"Oh, that's—" Nurse Angie said, her frown beginning to dissolve into something else—a look of wonder, we thought, like she'd seen the tallest man in the world at the circus. "A rehabilitation program?"

He nodded. "Brand new machines, a big jet pool, new techniques to help them regain muscle strength, nurses trained specially for treating infantile paralysis working around the clock with them. They're pulling kids from all around the state that've been stuck in lungs for six months or more."

"Oh. That—" she said again, smile stretching, blinking suddenly, and she turned to the other men. "That's so wonderful! Oh thank you Jesus, this is amazing. How are you gonna get them all there?"

"Well, ah." The doctor glanced over us. "They're really just here to—" he made a face.

“They’re just running some tests.”

“Oh of course, but I’m certain they’re all capable of complete recovery in a year, maybe less, if we just had the resources—”

“Well you see,” he said, and his voice got quieter, though we could still hear him through the racket of the lungs. We were used to the noise. “I should’ve explained this better. Here’s the deal—the new program has a certain number of spots, and there’s a plenty of kids around to fill them. So they told me they have thirteen spots for us—just thirteen, and I’ve only got the twelve kids downstairs, and they all passed, but I thought, hey, why not give the last spot to of those poor colored kids upstairs? So they’re running some tests, but all I can promise you is one spot.”

Watching that smile drain slowly away, something else we’d never seen creeping into it’s place was terrible, but when Nurse Angie finally nodded, the doctor just smiled and said “good girl,” patting her shoulder, and walking past her to the room to join the other doctors.

One by one, they unpacked us from our lungs, we found ourselves relieved that they had come the day after our bath day, so grateful that Nurse Angie kept our worn pajamas clean—worries we hadn’t even thought about in so long. They listened to our breath, measuring how much air we could pull in, how far our chests expanded, even asking how dizzy we felt, and we tried our best to breathe regular and slow, like the machines, but after just a minute or two, all most of us could do was gasp.

They bent and pulled our arms and legs through the motions like Nurse Angie did, and she stood behind them, smiling and pointing out how well we did, but they ignored her questions and didn’t smile at all, not really. They propped us against the wall, and asked us to draw our knees up towards our chest, to raise a hand off the ground, to move one foot, to bend one elbow. Most of us couldn’t do any of these things, though only Bernie cried, and he could almost hide it. We wanted to say, *who cares what they think about us, these white doctors we never seen before?* But it was terrible to see

Nurse Angie's disappointed face, to see the way these doctors shook their heads or shrugged when we failed, so we tried our hardest, and then tried not to look at her when we failed.

Della surprised them though. She surprised herself too. She could do at least half of the things the men asked, more than Bernie even, and we all knew he practiced twitching his feet and trying to move whenever he could. We watched her, our necks craned to sharp angles, too astonished to use the mirrors, as Della, with her quick snarl and dark face like a chip of stone, who gleefully dreamed her own death each night, lifted a leg, an arm, rotated an ankle just an inch, flapped her hand at the wrist and curled her fingers until she could touch her fingertips to her thumb.

Of course, she couldn't stand, or even sit up straight on her own, but the doctors told Nurse Angie that really she only "lacked muscle strength in her core" and that with some "rehabilitation," with "help from real medical staff who could work with her every day," she might be able to live without the iron lung. We saw Nurse Angie's eyes widen, and we wanted to shout that we had been doing 'real work,' that Nurse Angie did exercises with us every day, but she was already nodding, saying yes, of course they were right, we all could get better if we were just had better care.

They lay Della on a rolling cart with a little pallet on top, and began packing away their instruments. Della whined and called Nurse Angie, asking where they were going, getting angry when no one answered her.

Nurse Angie touched the arm of the doctor who worked downstairs, and he turned to face her with a pinched look on his face.

"Please," she said. "They have to have room for one more. That little boy over there," she pointed at Bernie, and the rest of us pretended we weren't listening, and didn't notice the hopeful look Bernie suddenly got. "He is so determined, he'll work so hard if you just give him a chance, I know he can do it."

"Listen, I wish they could all come too, but I don't decide their terms, and they told me

thirteen kids. I got twelve downstairs who have the potential to walk again. You get it? It's enough that we turned this ward into an orphanage, and not one of these kids is taking the place of a kid whose families visit every week and cry when they have to leave. Whose parents still pay the bills," he emphasized.

We expected Nurse Angie to flare up like a bottle rocket, like she usually did, but we watched, astonished, as she drooped and only whispered, "But it isn't fair" again.

The doctor shook his head, his face impatient. "Maybe, but I can't change it either way. Now if you want them to take a different kid, that's fine. It's up to you. They got space for one, so you decide who needs it most."

Nurse Angie didn't look up at the doctor's eyes, but she didn't look at us either. Della watched from the cart, her face still livid.

"Nurse Angie, what are they gonna do with me?" she demanded, though without her lung and her regular breaths, her voice was barely a whisper.

Bernie whimpered and scrunched his face into a concentrated ball, keeping in the tears of frustration. And Angie looked at the feet of the doctor in front of her.

We know now, when we think about this moment, about all that happened after, she was holding Bernie and Della in either hand, weighing them against each other. Bernie with his dreams of running. Della with her dreams of dying.

And the rest of us, all with our dreams of something, our little garden of hopes that she'd so carefully planted and watered, and now was watching burn up in the white hot Louisiana sun.

"Take the girl."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'll work with the others myself."

The doctor frowned. "You know it's almost certain not one of these children will ever walk

again.”

“I have Kenny’s book, I know what to do.”

“That quack lady and her no-brace ideas? Who knows if it even works? And even if they did get out of here, where would they go? I hate to say it, but who would adopt a colored child who’s a cripple, too?”

Nurse Angie covered her face with her hands, and he softened.

“Hey there. I know it’s hard,” he said, and put a hand on her shoulder. “And you’re doing so well with them. We’re all real proud of you downstairs. Just don’t kill yourself trying to work miracles, alright?”

She jerked her out of his grasp. “Only God works miracles. Lucky for us, he doesn’t concern himself with color.”

The doctor gave her a look—we’d seen it on the faces of adults many times, white ones mostly, even in our lives before. A look like she smelled funny and he wanted to laugh, but also like he sort of felt sorry for her.

“Well,” he said. “Who knows, maybe the program will work so well they’ll have more spots open soon, and then they can take the rest of them.”

The other men finished strapping Della to their cart, one of them joking that he hoped she had her bags packed, so she wouldn’t ever have to come back here. Her eyes widened, and we saw she was just as scared as she was angry, and she looked up at Nurse Angie, who had tears in her eyes, a hand over her mouth.

“I said I don’t want to go!” she said, her voice thin and brittle sounding. “I don’t want to! Put me back! Stop!”

One of the men patted her hair and she thrashed away, trying to bite, and they laughed and said hey now. Nurse Angie went to her and smoothed her hair back, explaining in soft tones they

were taking her somewhere really nice, a place that would make her get better. After a moment, Della twisted her face away from her and ignored the kiss Nurse Angie gave her, but when she whispered something to her, we saw Della nod, once.

And then, we watched them wheel her away, their heavy footsteps on the wooden floor and the shrieking wheels of the cart echoing back after them.

And Della left our room forever.

“Nurse D,” Bernie asked that night while the breeze crept in through the cracks of space between the window and its swollen frame, bringing rain-sticky air, the bright smell of mud and grass. “Nurse D, will the storm knock the power out?”

“Hush, child,” she said. “This storm just noisy, a noisy little spring shower.”

“But what would happen,” he asked. “Just, if it did go out. What would happen to us?”

“I’d be here, of course.”

“But—”

“Shh,” she said. “Try to sleep a little. You’ll be just fine. I’m not ever gonna leave you.”

“But *I* want to leave,” he said. “Why can’t I leave? Please, just let me go home.”

The rest of were silent, watching him in the mirrors, choked with the dread we had whenever one of us began to cry for home. Always, always, it reminded us of Rodney Fruget, and of course, of what we’d lost too. We didn’t want to talk about it, but that day was the first time we’d heard someone, an adult who knew, say it—no one was coming back for us.

“Hush,” Nurse D said, smoothing the sweat and tears off his face. “Hush, you’ll make yourself sick carrying on like this. You’re running a fever already. Just rest now. Just sleep.”

By that point, many of us had favorite places we’d found one night and come back to enough

times that we'd worn an easy path there, and on most nights, we would go there just as if we hadn't already been there the night before. The discovery still got us, sure, but the excitement of finding a new color or smell, seeing a new slant of light in a window we'd seen over and over, brushing past the particular grain of a father-aged man's beard as he slept or hearing the soft *tink-tink* of a pretty little girl's spoon in the jam jar—it could last us for days and *days*. Everything was new to us who spent so much time staring at the same rafters each morning, and we were beginning to find out the world was so big, and there was nothing, *nothing* to keep us anchored, but the places we knew by heart, the people we followed through whatever snatch of their lives we could get.

So every night, we would rise together like party balloons, peeling away in clumps of two, three, or more sometimes, or alone sometimes, or all together sometimes, and settle back into whatever space we'd decided belonged to us now—a warm kitchen full of dirty dishes and the signs of a family just having eaten, because we were still children, after all; a pier on the bayou, worn smooth with the memory of bare feet in the summer; the church where we got our first taste of communion; the corner shop where we liked to buy a Coca-Cola.

Before we went to sleep that first night after Della left us, one of us talked about going to look for her, though we had no idea where they'd taken her. We also thought maybe Della would be able to dream wherever she was, that we would fall asleep and float up and find her just outside, grinning and waiting on us. When Nurse D came though, and we asked her if it was possible, she shook her head and said maybe it was, maybe it wasn't—it would all depend on Della now.

And so we went out like any other night, and when we didn't find Della waiting, and when we'd searched every room of our own hospital and couldn't find her there, we gave up, and went around to the new places we had made our own and pretended for a few hours we were alive and part of the world just like anyone else. It felt so strange, to be missing one of us, though we often

didn't stay all together every night, and many of us looked over our shoulders again and again as we headed off.

We think now that the empty space Della left in our group is what made us not notice that Bernie wasn't with us that night, either. We were distracted, confused and trying to hide how much what we'd heard that day scared us, and we didn't notice that Bernie didn't close his eyes and let Nurse D talk him into the dreaming that night. We knew he was upset, and if you had asked us, many of us would have whispered we were afraid to talk to him, because we knew Nurse Angie had hurt him, sending away Della instead of him, and so maybe the way we were trying to avoid him made us not notice when he stayed behind.

It was a quiet night, for all of us, and the next morning, when we woke up in our motionless bodies once again, we found Bernie Prejean was dead.

Nurse Angie found Bernie when she brought our breakfast in—none of us knew how to warn her, so we pretended we hadn't seen him yet, and turned our faces away when she came in. We thought she would scream and run for the doctor, like we had seen the other nurses do before, but she just stopped when she saw him, tilting her head to one side. She stepped closer, and said his name softly, and touched his face, then made a coughing, choking sound and turned and walked to her desk, and sat down, and cried.

One of the hand-windows on his lung had gotten open, somehow, and so engine couldn't change the pressure in his chamber and pull air into his real lungs. The rubber seal on the window was still there and the glass wasn't cracked, but the little latch that clamped it shut was broken, and Nurse Angie checked and rechecked all the rest of our latches to make sure they were rusted through or anything, but of course, they were all fine and working properly, just like Bernie's had been the day before.

The mechanic she made the doctors downstairs call in said Bernie might have kicked it open himself, in his sleep or something, and Nurse Angie said it was impossible, of course, he would have had to lift his foot six inches and kick hard, and maybe more than once, to get the window open. But we knew in our hearts he could have done it. Nurse Angie probably knew it too.

Nurse D had already left morning before we woke up, like she usually did, and we would wonder later why she hadn't called in the doctor, or taken Bernie out herself, or at least laid a cloth over his face. She wasn't like the night nurse before her who hadn't even noticed Rodney—she would have known, we were sure of it, she would have heard his gasping over the noise of the lungs. But she didn't save him, and she left him there for Nurse Angie to find, for all of us to see staring blank into our mirrors when we opened our eyes, and we were afraid to ask her why.

The day after Nurse Angie found Bernie Prejean, a volunteer nurse appeared the next morning when Angie should have been there, and told us Nurse Angie had asked to take off that entire next week. It was the first time off she'd taken since she came to us, and when we realized she'd always had this ability, to stand and walk downstairs and never come back if she didn't want to, the room seemed to reel and sway around us, like a hammock. The face of the other nurse in our mirrors was startling, and as soon as the last of had eaten breakfast, we did our best to dive back into sleep and fly out to follow Nurse Angie. We were a little shaky at first without Nurse D, but as soon as we felt the morning sun warming us, sinking deep through us even, we realized this world was open to us too, in a way.

Still, it was harder to actually move—the air felt thicker, less fluid, and though didn't make any sense, the daytime world was more confusing than the night, and we scattered and regrouped, first circling the hospital, then taking bad turns and getting more muddled, until we finally recognized a

china shop we liked to visit, one that looked different with the bright sun making the big front window a giant mirror. From there, we finally found Angie's apartment just as she came out and locked her door behind her, carrying a small suitcase.

What? Is she leaving, we asked each other, is she going away for good?

We older kids tried to point out that her suitcase was small and she wasn't exactly wearing traveling clothes—a peach colored dress we had never seen, white gloves and a white felted hat, and those of us who were old enough to remember knew you didn't wear white gloves to spend the day on a bus—so surely she wasn't going anywhere very far or for very long. But our panic, which had been just barely contained as we searched for her through the maze of unfamiliar streets, began to bubble and fill all of us, no matter how old, at the thought that she might be leaving us completely, and we trailed after her, watching her so closely that it took us a moment to realize the feeling from earlier, like slogging through a swamp we'd never seen before, was gone and we were drifting along with no effort almost.

Nurse D had told us it was hard to go somewhere we hadn't seen before, that we would get confused and get lost if we tried to go very far out in the strange parts of the world that were only shadows and wide blank spaces in our minds, so almost every place we went was where we had grown up—little towns with only one paved road, or huddled groups of tiny houses surrounded by marsh and pine forests—and though we liked exploring the area around our hospital, it was like swimming through mud, sometimes. We didn't know where the resistance came from, or why we got so confused and distracted when we went somewhere we'd never been before, so we just accepted Nurse D's explanation that it was just supposed to be hard, and if we wanted to go somewhere new, it would be slow, tough work.

But following Angie was easy—just like we were a bunch of balloons she'd bought at the fair

and walked around with now, the knot of our strings in her fist. We had followed her before, but never in broad daylight like this, and never very far into areas we'd never been. On the nights we'd trailed after her before we'd always gotten worried and left her if she went off her usual path from the hospital to market to apartment, so we didn't know how different it could be, to just hitch ourselves to someone out in the actual world and drift along behind them.

Maybe because we know her, we guessed. Because she's so easy to recognize?

And almost by the time we realized the difference, we were standing in front of a train station.

She is leaving! some of us wailed. *She's really going away!*

She isn't, the rest of us said, *or at least, she's probably just going somewhere for a visit.*

Should we follow her, some of us asked. *To make sure she isn't leaving?*

Yeah, let's go with her on her trip!

But what if, some of us said, *what if she's gone for a long time? What if she goes so far away that we can't get back to our bodies again?*

Stupid, we'd have to come back when the other nurse wakes us up, one of us said, then paused, looking around. *Right?*

We had never actually thought it through before.

Well, one of us said, slowly, thinking out loud. *Well, if she's not leaving for good, we can follow her back here, right?*

Yeah, another of us spoke up. *And even if the day nurse doesn't wake us up, Nurse D will be there tonight, just like always. If we're lost, she'll come and find us. She'll know how to bring us back.*

That made perfect sense. For a moment, we'd forgotten we had Nurse D too—of course she would never let us get lost, of course she would never just leave us out here to float around in the world while our bodies lay behind in the machines, the way back to them forgotten.

So when the train arrived with its scream of wheels on rusty track, we followed Angie aboard.

We didn't know where the train was heading until it started moving, and the conductor came by to check Angie's ticket.

"New Orleans Metropolitan," he said, reading her ticket. "Should be just a few hours then."

Nurse Angie nodded, smiling her movie star smile, while we wriggled and whispered in excitement, careless enough that she sat straighter and looked around suspiciously, though the rest of the colored car was empty. We flattened ourselves to the side of the car, then getting distracted by the dusty velvet curtains hung above the windows, then by the windows themselves, and the world that rushed by outside—brown and green ground darkened into a blur, with startling patches of bright light and sky reflected in the water, dizzying moments when the ground dropped away and we crossed over a river or bayou on high trestle that made us feel like we were flying, though we realized with a giggle that it was nothing compared to real flying.

It made us dizzy, and a little panicky again, to see so much ground flashing past us, to realize we were going faster now than we'd ever gone before.

None of us had been on a train before. When we were brought to the hospital the first time, it was in the neighbor's car, or a cab our mothers called in panic, carried there by our fathers, or even in the town's horse-drawn ambulance, and few of us could remember anything about that trip other than the fear on our family's faces, the heavy, squeezed feeling of trying to breath with lungs that suddenly didn't work. When we were taken from our first hospital to where we were now, it was in large ambulance car, but we don't remember that ride at all, since they had given us medicine to make us sleep.

So we played in the car, chasing each other around or crawling beneath the seats, then crowded around the window, watching the world go by and pointing, whispering softly to each other because even with the noise of the engine and the wheels on the tracks and the air whooshing

by, we were sure that somehow Nurse Angie would hear us and find out about the dreaming.

We could smell New Orleans before the train even stopped—salty, thick air that smelled like food and smoke and cars in the sun and lots and lots of people. It was a good thing that following Angie was easy, otherwise we would have been lost forever in the grimy exciting maze of the city. Even so, we almost lost her several times because we were too busy darting ahead and behind her to pay attention to following, peering into every window we passed, gawking at the fine people out in their nice dresses and suits; at a young white lady we found asleep in the stinky space between two buildings, her hair mussed into the sort of rat's nest some of our mothers had warned us about, her skirt rumpled up above her knees; at a skinny man with a scraggly beard who stood on the street corner, shouting in a hoarse voice about how the war was evil and would bring The End Times—we knew what The End Times was, from Nurse Angie reading us the Bible, though she had never told us it was actually the war, and so we stopped to listen to him, surprised Nurse Angie didn't come tip-toeing over in her heels as well to ask him how he'd found that out. We watched two younger men in army uniforms come over to him, and instead of telling them about The End Time, the man dropped his head and mumbled something we couldn't hear. The soldiers laughed, sounding almost mean, and one of them pushed the raggedy man, almost tipping him over, and he picked up the stacks of papers he had been handing to people, and stumbled away.

We realized Nurse Angie had gotten really far ahead of us, and we scattered like leaves, frantic, and though it only took a second to find her head bobbing in between the other blank faced people, we stuck closer to her after that.

Finally, we came to a group of tall buildings, just as big as our hospital, and Nurse Angie stopped outside one of them that looked almost like a big house or a hotel, standing at the base of the steps that lead up to the door. We expected her to look up at the carved wooden sign above the

door, like we did—Flint-Goodridge Hospital of Dillard University, it read. We so rarely got to practice the things Nurse Angie had taught us outside of her lessons, and our satisfaction buzzed in the air between us. But Nurse Angie stood paused on the third step, looking to the side, at the bright pink flowering trees that stood in a neat soldier's row.

Pretty, some of us whispered. The trees shouldn't have been anything special—after all, those of us who were old enough to remember had seen that kind explode into bright flowers every spring, and we all saw trees like that at night when we floated out into the world. But something, maybe the way Nurse Angie was looking at them with the sort of expression we had never seen before, a full-mouthed, lip-trembling almost smile, made the trees look even prettier than normal.

When she finally blinked, and climbed the steps to the door, we followed her.

It was strange enough for us to see Angie out of uniform, but even stranger to see her in normal clothes inside a hospital, one that looked nothing like our own, but also more like it than we expected. Here, the floors were wooden and worn instead of white tile, but scrubbed just as clean as in our hospital. The rickety chairs in the front entry room were all taken, and surrounded by people standing, and farther inside beds were mostly the same simple, iron frames, the sheets clean and filled with adults and teenagers and some children. Here and there a man in the same crisp white doctor's jacket stood speaking to a patient, or touching an arm or listening to a chest with one of their ear-connectors.

The first difference we noticed was this place was *loud*, not with machines but with voices. Men called across the room to other men; a little girl yelled and tried to squirm away from the doctor holding up a syringe while her mother tightened her grip on her daughter's shoulders, and some of the children lined up behind her started to whine; a trio of women in the waiting room roared with laughter over the head of another woman leaning back with her foot propped up and a

sulk on her face. Even as we followed Nurse Angie through the waiting room and the first large hall into the connecting rooms beyond, none of these places held the still, empty-church hush we'd seen in the other rooms of our own hospital.

Because this hospital is more full of people? we wondered.

And then, *Maybe because it's still daytime?*

And then, *Or maybe white people get sick less often?*

Because that was the second difference we noticed—color. Because we were children, and because of the single large hall where we lived was filled only with ourselves and our Nurse Angie and Nurse D, and because even in our lives outside before and our lives outside now, we only noticed people's color when they were different from us, and in this hospital, we realized, everyone was colored like us. There weren't separate rooms or lines for us, we realized as we followed Angie farther into the hospital: *every* room here was for us.

Then someone shouted "Angie!" and we all turned, a huge grin breaking across Nurse Angie's face.

A short, wiggly woman in a nurse's uniform came skittering across the room, dodging in between the beds while the patients pushed themselves up on their elbows to watch.

"Angie girl," the woman cooed, "look at you in your pretty clothes!"

We watched, a little surprised, as Angie dropped her arms around the other woman's neck and squeezed.

"Well now I'm glad to see you again too," the nurse said, squeezing her back, her voice a little muffled against Angie's shoulder until she let go and they stood back. "But what in God's name you back here for?"

Angie smiled and tilted her head from side to side. "Oh, you know, visiting. I got a few days off this week so I thought I'd come check in on y'all, make sure you doing you're job correctly."

“Come to check on me, huh?” The other woman’s eyebrows went up. “Well they sure made you big stuff over there or what.”

“Course they did, what else would they do with me?”

The lady gave her a sly grin. “I tell you what, they better have made it worth your while for leaving us here for that little backwater hospital. You couldn’t make me do that, no matter what kind of money you threw at me, no ma’am.”

“Well Viola, maybe you’re just more devoted than me.” Angie patted her shoulder. “But I didn’t know you were down here now—who’s up with the kids then?”

“Oh you, know, same girls as always, just a coupla new ones instead of me and you.” She shrugged and looked around. “I asked to get moved. Sometimes you gotta have a break.”

Angie’s nodded, wearing her face of hidden concern that we knew pretty well by now, but she nodded and asked the woman if she would be off in time for dinner that night. They made plans, and the woman said Angie better go on upstairs and find the others. They hugged once more before the lady turned and trotted off to where some man was sitting up in bed and yelling he was about to take a leak right there in the sheets if she didn’t come help him to the “tawlit” right then.

Angie walked up two turns of the staircase, saying hello and smiling at a couple of people walking by that recognized her, and when we came to another floor, she opened the heavy oak door to rows and rows of little beds, a room bright with shrieking and laughing and handclap rhymes, with children lying in bed or sitting huddled together on top of the covers or even wandering between the rows—*walking* we thought, feeling a wrench of jealousy in our stomachs—holding dolls, or even, and we all immediately drifted closer, drawn, talking with their parents who sat forward, eager, on the edge of the chairs they pulled up alongside.

One nurse saw her, and then another, and soon Angie was pulled into a cloud of giggling

women hugging her and touching her arms, rubbing the silk of her sleeve between their fingers and making silly faces at her.

As she talked, we darted around that floor, searching for the room with the lungs, but though we saw a couple of children walking down the hall with the arm sticks and leg cages we'd seen some of the children in our own hospital wear, and though we saw a lot of children lying in bed, we didn't find a single iron lung, not on that floor or the others we searched through.

Where were the ones like us? We wanted to see other children inside iron lungs—maybe they could see us, like the white children could at night sometimes, and if we were careful and slow, maybe they would talk to us and not be so frightened. We could ask them how long they had been inside, ask if this wasn't their first hospital too. We could ask them if they still saw their families. If the hospital had extra lungs, we thought, maybe we could ask Nurse Angie to have us moved here. We imagined waking up each morning to noises other than just our own engines—maybe the children who could walk would come visit us, and when we could walk again ourselves, we could also dart around the beds like minnows, playing tag.

We got tired quick, this loud new place wearing us out like we'd been running and playing all this time, so we sat watching Nurse Angie talking to the other nurses, then going around the big room saying hello to all the children, giving us more flashes of hot sticky jealousy.

Is it almost time for dinner? we wondered, *Maybe our bodies are hungry*, and we worried a little about what the replacement nurse would do if she couldn't wake us up for dinner. No one had ever tried to wake us up when we were out in a dream before. Would it be like waking up from a normal dream—one minute you're running through an empty room looking for something you absolutely need, with a big scary monster chasing you, and then suddenly you open your eyes and it's quiet and dark around you and your momma is telling you *bush, bush now, you were just having a bad dream?*

Finally when the night nurses came to relieve them, we left with Angie and three of the nurses, still wearing their starched white uniforms and caps. The tallest took Angie's little case, grinning and swinging it over her shoulder while Angie protested, saying she had worked hard all day while she herself had done nothing but sit and watch.

"You hush your mouth now," the other nurse said, hugging Angie to her with her other arm. "I got lots of energy and from the looks of you, they been working you to the bone over in that other place."

"Therese's right, sweetheart, so just let her carry it," one of the others called over her shoulder—Viola, the short woman we'd seen first. "You pretty as ever, but you look wrung out and hung to dry too. Lemme guess," she said, elbowing the woman beside her, "none of the other nurses really understand what the children need, so you been taking on extra shifts again."

We watched, our lagging interest rising again as Angie ducked her head and blushed. We'd never seen anyone make her turn red before. Many of us didn't understand what could make a person flush deep pink like that—we knew enough to associate it with silly questions about beaux and girlfriends, but here was Angie pink as an azalea flower, even though her beau hadn't been mentioned once, and she seemed proud, too, that these women would say such things about her.

They walked to a cafe down the street, and the lady waiting by the front door hugged Nurse Angie too, took all four of them to table right away, almost like she'd been saving it for them. Almost everyone inside the cafe turned when they saw the nurses and nodded at them, smiling, and we wondered if these were people who had been to that big hospital too.

"Actually," Nurse Angie said, once they'd sat down. "It's a little strange—there aren't many other nurses, not really. There's a couple of volunteer nurses or temps—they're always changing and I'm always having to train a new one—who come upstairs on my days off, but other than that, it's just me during the day, breakfast 'til bedtime, and the night nurse." Angie made a little face at this mention

of Nurse D, but the other three didn't say anything about it.

"Wait," one of them said after a minute—we hadn't heard her speak yet, and her voice was pleasing and deep. "You're saying you work what—five, six days a week? Whole twelve-hour shifts just by yourself? They don't give you anyone to help you out?"

"Only five," Angie said, quiet. "And the children, there's only twelve of them, and they are so good, so sweet and well mannered and they've been there so long—" she stopped, her face looking funny, but cleared her throat. "Actually, there's only ten now, one of them got picked for this new experimental rehabilitation program they're starting over at Charity and the other—" Again, she paused here. "Well, he died a couple of nights ago."

All three nurses sat straighter, their faces going still when just a moment before this they'd been leaning forward with their eyebrows raised and a teasing smile on their lips.

"Just a couple of nights ago?" Viola asked. "Are you doing all right, then?"

"No," Angie said, her voice quiet. "I know it's stupid, I wasn't even there when it happened, but I can't help feeling it was my fault."

"Angie honey, you know that's not true," Therese, the tall woman, said. "That's what happens when we take care of sick kids—sometimes they too sick to get better."

"But he was doing so well, he wasn't even really sick at all, he was improving and working on getting his movement back, and I—I think I ruined his hopes and that made him just, I don't know, give up?" We shifted in the air behind her, the memory of how Bernie's body had just died two days before making us itchy and a little scared, and Angie sat up and glanced behind her, looking straight through the middle of us, before putting her head back down

"Angie, you stop that, you can't blame yourself like this. You know better."

"No, but it's true. Their doctor," she waited as a girl in a nice pressed skirt and blouse brought them cups of strong coffee and big, flaky pastries shaped like half a moon, and then she lowered her

voice and went on. “This terrible white man from downstairs who never even comes up to check on them, he said when they were testing for that special program that they would never walk again, that they were never going home. Just said it out loud, like they couldn’t hear it or something. And I— I didn’t say anything, and I’m sure they thought that meant I agreed. And then, they could only take the one child, and I thought Della was the one who needed to get out first the most, so I picked her, I thought I had so much time to work with the others, and now—” She covered her eyes with her hands, her voice coming out muffled but not teary. “That poor little boy, he just gave up.”

“Come on, honey, nobody died from just giving up, not like that,” the quiet woman said quietly, pulling Angie’s hands away from her face. “You can’t let yourself get these ideas.”

“I know, Marie, but some days I just don’t know if I can keep them going. They can be so cheerful, and so hopeful, and I just want to do everything I can for them.”

“It sounds like you already have,” the Viola said, her voice so kind it sounded just like something one of our mothers could have said, and the other two nodded.

“No, I found this book,” Angie leaned forward and tapped her hand on the table, suddenly eager, and we saw the stiff worry fade from the women’s faces a little. “This nurse from Australia, she theory about how people, especially children, that get paralyzed from polio can learn to walk and move again, but we let their muscles shrink and get out of use, or we put braces on them that twists their natural growth, and she used her new methods on some of her patients, and some of them hadn’t been able to walk or really move for almost a year, and little by little, she did these exercises with them and applied heat after and wouldn’t let them wear braces, and it worked, most of them got to be able to walk again.”

Therese nodded. “Yeah, I heard about that—not everybody likes it, but it’s not like it could do any harm if it doesn’t work. So you’ve been trying these exercises on them?”

Angie shook her head. “Only for about a month now, but it seems like they’re already getting

stronger. When they did that test, Della could do so many of the things they asked her too, I could see even these smart-faced doctors were surprised. Bernie too, he..." She trailed off and two of the women exchanged glances, and Viola quickly asked how often Angie did the exercises with us.

"Only twice a day, if I can manage that even." Angie told her, and sighed. "There's not that many of them, but I just get so tired, and getting them out of the lung one by one and fitting them back is just so much work, and I can never cart enough hot towels up there by myself. I don't think the other day nurses have been working on them, even though I showed them how—"

"Hold on," Marie said. "I thought all your kids were all in iron lungs. That they were all there at that hospital 'cuz they had the lung polio *and* the crippling polio."

"Well, yes, but that doesn't mean the exercises won't help them."

"Exercises might make them able to move again, but if their lungs don't to heal on their own, you can't exercise them back to normal."

Angie shook her head. "No, but I'm sure if I just worked with them more, they could regain lung capacity too."

Marie opened her mouth, but we saw Viola bump knees with her under the table, and she didn't say anything. Instead, Viola asked what the night nurses were like, and whether Angie thought she could get them to do another round before bedtime to help out.

"I'm not sure." Angie made a face. "She seems, I don't know, the children seem to be over the moon about her, and she seems to really care about the children too, though I've not talked to her much, but she's so strange."

"Strange how?"

"I don't know how to put it—maybe, a bit uneducated? Or just, very different? She isn't like us—I don't know where she went to school."

Marie frowned at her and said all uneducated meant is maybe Nurse D didn't have the sort of

parents Angie did. The other women nodded and Angie blushed deep and went on, talking a little faster.

“No, I know, but it’s not just that. She hardly ever talks, just nods if you speak to her, and she has her head completely *shaved*, and she carries around this ridiculous little oil lamp, like she’s playacting Nightingale or something, and I’m certain I saw her with fortune-telling cards of some sort once, like she’d been reading them at night with the children.” Angie shrugged. “I can’t explain it, but she feels a little off, maybe. Creepy.”

“What are the others like?” Viola asked.

Angie gave her a blank look. “Well, I guess there aren’t any. Not after— well, maybe, on the days I’m not there? Though the children never mentioned another night nurse.”

“So, she’s working every night? That can’t be, there’s no way they’d allow that.”

Angie snorted, another thing we’d never seen her do. “You would be surprised the sort of stuff this hospital is just peachy with. It’s not like our place—they have different floors for blacks, and you don’t see any of the doctors on those floors if they don’t have to be. I don’t think they’d notice if I just up and left without telling anyone—the reason it’s taken me so long to visit is because I couldn’t get them to find me a replacement nurse for a week.”

“Is this why you came to visit then?” Therese asked, her voice strange. “Because your patient died?”

Angie looked up quick and shook her head. “No, of course not. I had been trying to get a week off to come and visit for a while now, but there just never seemed time, and then when Bernie—the little boy who died, when he—well, I just really needed to come and see you all after that.”

“Is he the only one who’s died there?” Viola asked.

“No, there was another little boy—” she paused, and we realized she was trying to remember

his name.

Rodney, we whispered, *Rodney Fruget*, but she only shook her head and went on.

“There was another little boy, just a couple of weeks after I started there, who died in the night too. It wasn’t his machine or anything, he just...” she shrugged. “He just died. The other nurses— there were more than— said he hadn’t been doing very well from the beginning, and he died in the night.” She laughed a soft little *ha*. “I was so angry, I was so sure it was the night nurse’s fault, she didn’t even notice he’d been dead most of the night, poor thing. At least I convinced them to let her go. I don’t know why I can’t think of his name just now.”

A moment of silence, and Marie said, “And how did this last one die? The same way?”

“No, he—” Angie’s shoulders slumped down. “Somehow he kicked one of the hand-portals open. I think he was practicing the exercises I’d been teaching him, and it just happened.”

“It must have been a really strong kick,” Therese said. “Those rubber seals are stuck tight, you know that.”

“I know, and I made them come and double check all the latches of the other lungs, just to be sure, but still—”

“The night nurse didn’t notice until too late?”

“You know...” Angie blinked, and paused, like she hadn’t thought about it. “No, she must not have. She should have seen—”

“Honey, you know I’m not saying you ought blame her,” Viola said quickly. “God knows it sounds like she’s working just as hard as you are. But you gotta learn to give up responsibility sometimes. There’s no way this was your fault, you weren’t even there. It was one of those things no one can guess would happen.”

“But if she’d seen him,” Angie was staring out the window, not even looking at the other women. “She should have seen him, right? It takes a whole three minutes to suffocate—she could

have closed it in time.”

“Come on Angie girl, you know how hard it is on night shift in those noisy rooms—it was dark, and she probably just didn’t see him. It’s not like he coulda been yelling or anything.”

But we saw her face hardening into her determined look, one we knew.

“Don’t you see though? If the hospital is only going to hire one nurse per shift, we can’t have anyone be that careless. That’s why they let that other nurse go when— when that first little boy—”

Rodney, one of us shouted, loud as they could, and we all joined in, louder and louder, *Rodney Rodney Rodney* and again, Nurse Angie frowned a little, and looked around, but didn’t hear us.

She forgot his name, we said, and each one of us felt sick to our stomachs, suddenly wanting so much to be able to find our way home now.

One thing we were afraid to ask—what would happen if we left our bodies empty for too long. Would they go on living, somehow, while they waited for us? If we were gone long enough, would we come back to find they’d healed on their own, able to move and breathe again, and take us back into our real lives?

Later, we followed Nurse Angie as she hugged Marie and Viola, and left the cafe with Therese, who still carried her bag even though Angie complained and pulled on it. Therese flicked her hand away, making both of them giggle at how silly it was. As they walked, the buildings that lined the street turned into a whole neighborhood of tall straight brick houses with a lot of windows. Angie stared up at them as we passed, but we were so tired we hardly noticed turning corner after corner, until we followed them up the steps into Therese’s apartment.

“It’s tiny,” she said, opening the door, “but I live by myself now. Having this much peace and

quiet to myself is just sinful.”

Her apartment had bare floors and walls except for three framed photographs that we immediately went to and studied. Two were portraits—one of a young lady with perfectly curled hair wearing the sort of old-timey clothes some of us remembered seeing in church sometimes, and the other was of a woman and man, and a little girl, maybe four years old, all dressed in nice, ironed clothes, the man and the little girl both grinning big with their teeth showing, while the lady smiled softer, just a little. We figured this must be Therese when she was little, with her parents. The other picture was bigger, and showed a whole bunch of girls wearing something like a big black housedress with little stiff white nurse’s caps pinned into their hair. There were so many faces, more than sixty, some of us who could count that high said, and we looked carefully at each until we found Therese’s face—easier to recognize when she was older—and saw standing right next to her was Angie, wearing dark lipstick and her movie star smile.

We were afraid to wander around the apartment much—since in a smaller, quieter place we were sure Angie would catch us, and besides, there wasn’t much in there to interest us. We flopped down in the front room, spilling off the tiny sagging sofa onto the floor, and listened to Therese and Angie in the other room. They talked for hours at that table, mostly about people we didn’t know, and though we were still upset that Angie had forgotten Rodney’s name, and had just left us at the hospital without even telling us how long she’d be gone, we were proud of how often she talked about her “little ones back at the hospital.” Even Therese mentioned it after a while.

“You talk about them a lot,” she said, and we heard Angie give her little *oopsy* laugh, and say sorry.

“No, it’s alright,” Therese said. “Are you glad you did it?”

A breath of silence, and we all waited, perfectly still.

“Most of the time, yes of course I am. They are such an inspiration, and I’ve gotten to do

some things for them—did I tell you about Reggie putting in all those mirrors? And now, with these new rehabilitation techniques, maybe the hospital will get them another nurse, and we can finally get them out of there.”

“You think? You heard what Marie said about their polio making their lungs crippled too, they don’t just have the regular kind. Otherwise they wouldn’t be there, right?”

“Maybe it’s almost too much to hope for, but I really think I just need to work with them more. Some of them may not even be really crippled, they just got put inside a lung when they were so little their muscles never quite developed. Does that make sense?”

We heard Therese push her chair away from the table and go to the sink to turn on the water. “I see how that could be, and it’d be wonderful if it was so, but Angie girl, you the same as always, you never know when something’s taking too much out of you or when you need to take a step back.”

“But Therese, I’m all they have.” Her voice got softer almost like she was afraid of someone else hearing her. “Most of them are wards of the state now—two of them got dropped off at their first hospital without even a note—the hospital staff named them because they were too little to talk.”

Therese made a shocked *mm-mmm* noise.

“It’s just so hard to see them stuck there like that. They’d been in that room for months before I even got there, and none of their families have come by for so long, it’s like they’re trapped in this, this *purgatory* and I— I don’t know how much longer they can stay there.”

“I think the problem is how much longer *you* can stay there.”

“No, that isn’t—”

“Angie, it sounds like the hardest job in the world. I never heard of anyone working one nurse so hard with all those patients the way they work you and that night nurse. No one can keep that

up.”

“Therese,” Angie started, her voice more timid than we’d ever heard it. “Do you think that night nurse—” she paused. “I can’t stop thinking about how that little boy’s door got opened, and now I’m worried about that night nurse. You remember that one nurse they told us about in school, the one that said she felt trapped so she—”

“Angie, what’re you saying? You really gonna go down that road here, accusing another nurse of something like that? Just ‘cuz you don’t *like* her?”

Silence, and we looked at each other, confused, and too scared to really think about what Angie was saying.

“See, this is your problem,” Therese went on. “You don’t trust anybody, you get all wrapped up in your patients and suddenly nobody but you can help them, you’re the only one knows how to be a nurse, and you start taking on too much. No, lemme finish, I’m not saying you’re not equal to it, and I think of everyone I know you got the biggest strength and the biggest heart for this work, but if you let yourself get so burned out, what do you think’s gonna happen to those kids? How you gonna keep doing this work if you let it take everything you got?”

“But it isn’t just a job, Therese, it’s, it’s—” she didn’t finish.

“It is not your life, or it shouldn’t be. You oughta know that at least.”

Angie didn’t say anything, and we heard water running in the sink for a little bit. When it stopped, a chair creaked as Therese sat back down, and she went on, quieter, so we had to strain to hear.

“You should talk to Viola about this you know. I can’t give you good advice ‘cuz I never went through something like this, but she’s been working longer and she’s had to learn a bit about letting patients go, more than the rest of us at least.”

“Why’d she ask to move?”

Therese sighed. “Taking a break, same reason you’re here taking a break. Got too attached to a patient to see reason and she couldn’t accept what everyone else could see was gonna happen, and then it happened.”

“Reggie said the same thing when he broke it off. I take on too much, get too wrapped up in my job.”

“Oh honey, I’m sorry. I didn’t know that.”

“It’s alright, I told him I already had the twelve kids at work to take care of, and sure as hell didn’t need another.”

Therese laughed at Angie’s sour tone, and we stopped listening and whispered to each other, angry at how easily this woman could tell Angie we weren’t that important. We didn’t talk about what Angie had said about our families, and though many of us wondered about it, we were too embarrassed to discuss who might be one of those kids named not by their parents but by some nurse in another hospital somewhere.

And then, in the middle of all of this, we each felt a strange little jerk, a tugging like a fishhook caught beneath our ribs. We looked at each other, surprised, and we said yes, that weird pull, yes we felt that.

Nurse D, we thought, Nurse D waking us up? Was this how it felt?

We gathered and rose, and though we were a little worried to leave Angie, the only sure anchor we had in the noisy maze of the city, the pull got stronger, almost yanking us forward, and we followed it up and up above the city, so eager to be home again, away from Nurse Angie with her grown up friends and her many different faces.

It felt like only minutes later that we’d followed the pull back down into the lights of this huge bright city, but we were exhausted, like we’d run there on foot, and we stared in disbelief at this city,

at the building that was rising up to us as we dropped, like a cluster of beads on a string, and then, for the second time that day, though it felt as if we'd lived a whole year in between, we stood in front of a huge building, reading the sign above it's wide door: Charity Hospital.

What? We whispered, a little frightened now, though we could still feel the tugging, calling us inside. *What is this place?*

It was an ugly building—nothing like Nurse Angie's Flint-Goodridge with it's fresh whitewash and frilly trim like you'd see on a fancy cake. It was big and boxy with rows and rows of square windows, and one of the tallest, scariest buildings we'd ever looked up at. We didn't talk about what to do next—but the pull was so insistent, so eager feeling, that after a minute of staring up and up, we crept inside, careful to move quietly, slinking along the walls so no one would catch sight or sound of us.

And inside, after floating up many floors and slipping down many halls, peering into many large wards, we heard the familiar shudder and push of engines, and following that sound, we found a long room full of iron lungs and there, at the end of the room, was Della.

Her eyes were open and staring straight up—not into the flat little mirror above her head, but past, at the low white tiled ceiling, like she was concentrating real hard.

Della, we whispered. *Della, can you see us?*

She turned her head when we spoke, her eyes opened wide and a huge grin on her face, we rushed to crowd around her and over her.

Finally! she said, blinking her eyes and shaping her mouth in our old silent language. *I have been trying and trying to call for y'all for hours now. I shoulda just gave up, but I can't sleep anyways, and I wanted to see if it would work.*

It was you! We thought it was Nurse D, calling us back!

Back? she asked, *back from where?*

And we told her all about the day spent on the train, about finding Nurse Angie with her suitcase and following her to New Orleans—*it's so hard to go anywhere during the daytime!* we said—all the events and the ordering getting jumbled about, and in the middle of it all, she kept trying to interrupt us and ask questions but we talked over her in our excitement to describe it to her, until finally she shook her head, really thrashing it back and forth until we got quiet.

Stop, it's too fast, I don't get it— why did Nurse Angie go somewhere? It's not even her day off.

And we remembered then, like a kick in the stomach. Of course she didn't know about Bernie. We had somehow managed to push it back away under the rest of what was happening, since it was so sudden and even worse to think about than Rodney's death, because surely Bernie dying was partly our fault too, but now we had to bring it back out and make it real enough and small enough to explain to her.

When we finally managed it, and she understood what had happened, Della's face went hard and she said a filthy word out loud, the type our mommas would have slapped us for, no question.

Della, we whispered, and some of us repeated the word too, not to curse, but more in surprise, to see if it was possible for us to say it too.

It's so stupid, she blinked, her teeth clenched against her breath huffing in and out, *they coulda taken him instead of me. If Nurse Angie had just listened to me instead of always being so smart about everything, Bernie would be all right—he'd be here, in this stupid lung, and I'd back with all of y'all and Nurse D.*

Some of us started say it wasn't Angie's fault, he'd kicked it open himself, but she went on, ignoring us.

They coulda taken both of us, they got room, you can see that. How hard is it to move a lung? You just take it apart! Reggie coulda done it for us in a minute. She clicked her tongue, and we were all silent for a little while, watching Della's face wrinkle as she squinted away angry tears. *It's not Nurse Angie's fault*, she said after a while, when she had calmed down. *Not all her fault at least. It's these stupid white people that*

said they could only take one of us.

Do you like it here, though? we asked. *Is it at least all right?*

I hate it, she said. *Well, I hate most of it. The kids here seem stupid and they're such crybabies. And the nurses—we have so many and you know not a single one of them can do our lessons with us? They got to bring in a lady special just for that. There's one nurse I don't mind so much, she seems all right.* She giggled. *You should tell Angie this lady's younger than her even, and she's a heathen. She just out and told me she thinks God isn't real. Not in the usual sense, she said, or something.*

We giggled at the thought of this poor, strange lady, and Della, who we could tell was happy to have an audience, started to tell us what had happened the past two days.

I was pretty much asleep for the entire trip, she said. *They packed me into this weird little jacket when we got on the train—hey, I bet it's the same train you guys came on today!—and then they gave me this syrup medicine that made me sleepy, so by the time I woke up, they were putting me inside this lung here.*

The first big difference she noticed, Della told us, after she had been checked over by two different doctors—*one of them was even a woman!*—and had been dressed in new pajamas and settled into a new iron lung, was the quiet. She had expected the children to be white and she had expected their whispers and stares. She hadn't expected the nurses' bright, stretched smiles and their too-loud introductions, their voices like the stiff meringue fluffed over a pie, not exactly, but these things didn't surprise her either. After all, we'd all seen a similar change come over Nurse Angie whenever one of the doctors came into the room, or once, when a shuffling, nodding pair of white men came in to tell us all about our immortal souls. The lungs in her new hospital were smaller than ours, yes, and painted a soft white like something you'd see in a rich lady's kitchen, not the dull grays and browns of our metal lungs, and she didn't realize this at first, but their engines were quieter, too, muffled somehow so their noise didn't crash against your ears and come off the walls at you like a rubber ball.

This new place was so different Della admitted she cried a little when they fit the rubber collar around her neck and locked her into place. She tried to dream that first night, closing her eyes in the dark and relaxing her mind the way Nurse D taught us, but after a minute something would wake her up and her eyes would snap open and stare at the low, unfamiliar ceiling, her heart in her ears, but she didn't know what it was that woke her—the tap of footsteps on wood in the hall outside their ward, the laughter, quickly hushed, of the night nurses trading gossip and secrets at their station, even the light cough of a little boy asleep just three lungs away from hers. Every sound she couldn't have heard before jarred her awake now.

We didn't think to wonder about how unfair it was that these lungs here were newer and nicer than ours, though several of us asked Nurse Angie weeks later, when she had come back to us, if we could paint our lungs white or orange or blue or pink, or even chartreuse, a word one of us had learned from an older brother who loved fancy motor cars.

But Della thought about the difference, and how unfair it was, and when we came and added to that the unfairness of Bernie dying when he should have been there too, getting better and learning to run, she started taking tally of all the unfair things and letting them nibble away in her mind the way her mother would have taught her not to, if she had been with her mother as long as many of us were.

The morning nurse at the new hospital came early to set up the breakfast trays, Della told us, and jumped when she saw Della was already awake and watching her.

“Oh honey,” she said. “Oh you startled me. What's wrong? Couldn't you sleep?”

Della considered telling the truth, but remembered the sticky-mouth sleeping syrup they'd given her before, and shook her head.

“I slept. But now it's morning and I'm awake.”

The nurse gave her a funny look and shook her head, but Della decided it was an improvement over her stiff confused smile from the day before. When she was done setting up all the trays, she walked back to Della's lung, her white leather loafers almost silent on the wood floor. She sat in a chair placed next to Della's tray, and picked up the spoon.

"Don't I hafta say my maths first?" Della asked. It was what we did at breakfast, Nurse Angie running us through a multiplication table or a string of adding and subtracting before she even picked up our spoons. She hadn't given us many new lessons, recently, but we had plenty to practice, so we didn't say anything about it, even though many of us secretly missed the days when she would stand in the middle of all our lungs and lay a big piece of wood, one Reggie had painted black and sanded smooth around the edges, and write out new spelling words and their meanings, or show us how you could take five apples away from a dozen, and know exactly how many you had left over without counting on your fingers.

"Your math?" The nurse had that funny look again. "Um, you don't need to say anything, I was just going to feed you. That's alright, isn't it?"

That's all right isn't it, Della repeated in her head. How funny it was to hear a nurse asking for permission! For just a moment, she imagined what the nurse would do if she said no, it wasn't alright and clenched her teeth shut, but she had promised Nurse Angie she would be a good girl and wouldn't embarrass all of us, and she was hungry besides, so she said yes, that was fine, and opened her mouth to be fed.

After a couple of bites, the nurse said, "You had lessons, then, at your... other hospital?"

Della nodded.

Another bite, and the nurse asked "And... the teacher who did your lessons came *before* your breakfast? Wasn't that too early?"

"Nobody *comes* and does lessons, Nurse Angie teaches us." Della swallowed the food she'd

been speaking around “She just makes us practice ‘fore we eat, that’s all.”

“Your morning nurse does your lessons too? That’s very—” The nurse frowned, but not in a mean way. “Well, resourceful, I suppose.”

Della decided not to say anything about Nurse Angie being the “all-day-long” nurse, and instead asked if someone would do lessons with them here.

“Oh yes, we have a schoolteacher come in special three days a week for you children. She’s very strict, but that’s all right, you don’t have to participate if you don’t want to. You just worry about getting stronger and better.”

Della squinted at her and chewed thoughtfully, a nasty little grin stretching across her face when she swallowed. “Why you got to get some lady to come teach us? You don’t know how to read?”

“What?” The nurse pulled the full spoon back from Della’s mouth. She didn’t look angry, just surprised, and Della could see a smile beginning, the kind we’d seen mothers give their children sometimes when they’d done something a little naughty. Della imagined that smile disappearing as grits dripped down the front of her nice white dress, but blinked the thought away.

“It’s okay if you can’t. Lotsa people can’t read. My momma could though, she read to me every night before bed, even when I was in her tummy.”

This was a lie, but there was no way this nurse could know that and it came out so smoothly, easy as breathing, that Della knew right then it *had* to be true, a foggy memory just past what she could see.

“Is that so? Do you like to be read to?”

Della nodded. “Nurse Angie read to us too, when we weren’t doing lessons. We were almost done with the First Letter to the Corinthians when I, when—” She stopped, biting back the word *left*. She hadn’t really thought about it yet—that stupid man had made a joke about never coming

back, but it felt so silly now, with the morning light coming in bright from the window—*they have a window here!* she thought to herself—it felt so unreal, to think she wouldn't go back to the other hospital tomorrow, back to being one of us again, with Nurse Angie's big smile as she touched their faces *good morning* and Nurse D's soft voice floating in the dark each night. She felt that if she said *left* it would be more true, that somehow it would mean she'd picked a side, and her return, which at this moment seemed very real and graspable, hanging just out of reach, would shrivel up and fall to the ground.

So she said nothing, and the nurse, after a moment of watching her face work through its confusion, said "That's alright, I'm sure you can catch up. What about this— what if I began reading to you, and the other children of course, during the day, maybe just after breakfast? Would you like that?"

Della squinted at her again. "Maybe. What do you wanna read?"

"Well, I'm not sure I'd choose the Bible." The nurse made a face, like she was thinking of something kind of gross, to Della's shocked delight.

"But there are lots of books that you might like," the nurse said, "wonderful stories about children having adventures. How about this—I'll bring one in tomorrow about a little boy who doesn't want to grow up, and he takes his friends away to this magic land and they play and swim with mermaids and fight pirates—" The nurse stopped. "Do you know what a pirate is?"

Della shook her head. "I know what a mermaid is though. Lecia told me they got mermaids at this circus and she got to see them sing and do a show when she went with her daddy. Before she got sick, of course."

Of course, she knew better than say that she had seen the mermaids, too, that we all had when the same traveling circus had come to the town where we were, and we'd gone just at dusk to a big empty field where they'd set up cages of bears and huge red birds that spoke, even a rippling, pacing

tiger, and we had watched the mermaids swimming in a tank together, nearly *naked* on top, tumbling through the water over and under each other, spins and spirals and little playful splashes, and it had been one of the best nights of our lives, and we couldn't talk, could even *think*, about anything else for weeks, though when we went back the next night, it was only an empty lot with worn grass and deep ruts carved into the mud.

“Well now,” the nurse said. “I think you might like this book too then, and I won't tell you about pirates, you'll just have to find out.” The nurse smiled, and seemed to be expecting her to say something, so Della smiled back, uncertain, and said the book sounded nice. She let the nurse talk all on her own while she finished her grits, exhausted now just by the idea that she would be here long enough to finish an entire *book*, and she hoped the nurse wouldn't ask her about all of us that she'd left behind, because she felt so close to crying.

By the time she was done eating, though, another child was awake and calling out down the way, and the nurse only patted Della's head and picked up her dirty tray, and left.

The rest of that day, Della told us, nothing much happened other than they met all of the nurses who would be taking care of them, and also the doctors who were going to be doing their special program—one of them was the lady doctor Della had seen the day before.

I'm a little scared about the exercises, she told us. What if I've been doing them wrong this whole time, and they get mad at me? What if I'm the only one who can't do it?

No, we told her, there's no way Angie's been doing them wrong. She has the book, and besides, she a hundred times smarter than these people here.

They told us today they thought we'd all be walking again in at least two years. I hope I'm not here for that long. She turned her head away from us for a second, then said I can't wait until I can go home again. I bet my mom is gonna be so surprised.

We didn't tell her, but we each thought about what we'd heard Angie say earlier that day—that most of us belonged to the state now, and though we weren't positive, some of us who were older were pretty sure that meant we didn't have families anymore. And of course, each of us secretly thought *there's no way she was talking about me, my family is just too busy to come visit*, and of course, each of us also had a cold feeling in the pit of our stomachs that maybe it was us she was talking about.

Maybe you'll come back and stay with us, some of us said, when they let you leave. That would be so great.

Della frowned and shook her head. *No, that's not what we're gonna do. We're gonna get better real soon—y'all will probably get better sooner than me even, since you have Angie—we're gonna get better, and we're gonna find our families, and then we'll all take trips every night together, and see each other's new homes.*

We nodded, happy with her plan, our excitement buzzing from us like static.

You should still come and see me too, she said. I'll try to go out dreaming with you, but if I can't do it without Nurse D, then I can at least call you here, and you can find me.

How did you do it tonight? we asked her. *We just had this funny feeling all the sudden, and we could just follow it straight here.*

She gave her little side to side mouth quirk that meant “I dunno” and said *I was just thinking about how you'd be out flying right about then, and I kept trying to get into the dreams and I couldn't, I'd end up just in normal sleep and have to come back up, and finally I just thought really hard, like yelling for you in my mind and I kept thinking, you have to hear me, you have to, I just really wanted*—she grit her teeth and squinted again, and we waited until it passed. *I'm so mad that I'm stuck here. These white kids won't talk to me, won't even look at me, and I hate this place, I didn't want to come here, and we watched her choke through her mad tears again.*

That nurse is the only nice person here, she said finally. She really did bring the book too, and read us a little bit, Della told us. It's really different from what Angie reads us.

She told us about the family of white children who lived in this huge house but still didn't

want to sleep alone in a room, whose father left them alone with a big dog, and that a another boy flew in through their window one night, and taught them how to fly too.

We couldn't believe it—there were books like this, books about people like us who knew how to float away at night?

Is the boy sick too? we asked. *Do the children get lost when they leave their house?*

I don't know, Della said. *We didn't get very far—they had just flown out their window when she had to quit reading.* She laughed. *The boy behind me, back there, he kept stopping her to ask "Miss, what does that word mean? Miss, I don't know that word either."* Her face was so funny! *And I bet you anything he's older than me.*

We snickered at this too, and as she told us more stories about her first two days there—how one girl cried when the nurse said her name wrong, how one boy choked on the pork and applesauce they'd eaten for dinner, and how the nurse had shrieked and called for the other nurse, who walked over all calm and just dug the piece out with her own fingers. The dark outside the windows started to turn the sort of watery light that meant it was almost morning, and Della asked if we were gonna try to go back to our bodies now.

Should we, we wondered. *Won't we get lost?*

She moved her mouth side to side again. *At least now you know where I am, right? And I'll call for you when it's nighttime again, and if you're still lost, you can come back here. I'll tell you the rest of the story she reads us then.*

We nodded, relieved that at least we knew we had sure one place, and said goodbye, then crowded around her and said it again, and then we left, exhausted, and so, so ready for home and our own real selves.

Maybe because we'd felt Della's little tug and knew what it was now, we realized we could feel several little hooks when we left the hospital and flung ourselves high up above the city. We still felt Della's, a little, but another, even stronger now, stretched back across the city in the direction we'd

come from. *Nurse Angie?* we wondered, but who else would be calling for us here?

And then we felt another, from a completely different direction, stretching across the wide dark water that lay curled around the city—*that's Nurse D, it has to be*, we decided, and after whispering together, we turned toward it and flew back across all the miles we'd traveled, over the big stretches of sparkling water and dark marsh forests, until we saw our own hospital and wanted to cry with relief.

Nurse D was there, waiting for us.

"I knew y'all would come on back when you were ready," she said after we settled back into ourselves and opened our eyes, she walked around in the soft light just before sunrise, grinning at each of us and touching our foreheads when she passed. "How about it, did you see lots of lovely things?"

We said yes, we'd seen Della, we followed Nurse Angie to New Orleans, we saw a man preaching about the end times and so many big buildings and lots of lights at night and music coming up from the houses, we saw a lake as big as ocean and the hospital where Nurse Angie used to work.

She laughed at how we scrambled over each other to be the first to describe things to her, and said "It's good you got to see what it's like to be out during the day and stretch your silver cords a little more."

This reminded us about how the air felt syrupy during the day, how we could barely move through it, and we asked her why it was more difficult than at night.

She nodded her head. "So y'all noticed that, good. Tell me, what's different about daytime? And don't say, 'the sun is up'."

"It's harder to sleep?" we guessed. "It's busier, and hotter? There are more people around?"

She snapped her fingers. “That’s it—more people around means more thoughts and feelings floating around with them. This little town ain’t so big, but y’all need to be careful going out in the daytime that you don’t get caught in all that noise coming out from people’s minds—since it’s just you without your little bodies to stick to, you can get pulled away real easily and lost.”

“Pulled away?” we asked. “Just by people’s *thoughts*?”

If it had been anyone but Nurse D with her carved statue’s face and her deep, easy voice, if it had been anyone than the woman who taught us the dreaming to begin with, we would have laughed.

“Then how come we could stay with Nurse Angie so easy,” we said, “even in that big city? There were *tons* of people around, even at night.”

She waited until all of us had control over our silly grins, and asked how we had found Della to begin with, and when we explained about the hook, and said that was how we’d gotten back, she nodded.

“If someone’s thinking about you, thinking about you *hard*, and a lot, it’s even stronger than the other thoughts around and you can follow it to wherever the person is, even if they are so far away. That’s how Della pulled you there, and that’s how you kept with Miz Angie the whole time.” Nurse D shook her head and smiled. “Except Miz Angie don’t know she has a hold on y’all, it’s just that she couldn’t stop thinking of you if she tried.”

“And what about you,” we asked her, basking in this attention. “Do you think of us all the time whenever you’re gone, too?”

She put her hands on her hips. “I don’t need to *think* about y’all ‘cuz I’m always *here* with y’all, whether you see me or not.” And with that, she said no more conversation for us, it was time to sleep—actually sleep—before the day nurse got there.

As we thought about it more throughout that day, the knowledge thrilled us—now that we knew, we could find our families out in the world, wherever they'd had to go, just by following the line when they thought about us. Surely, we thought, if Della and Nurse Angie thought about us strong enough to pull, our families are somewhere, doing that too.

We spent that next day avoiding the day nurse's face in the mirrors, and making excited plans to go back and visit Della.

But Nurse Angie came back early, only one day later. She looked less tired, and her voice was back to its cheerful brightness, so different from what we'd heard in New Orleans. Her absence didn't make us more grateful to have her than before, but instead it reminded us how easily we'd believed our parents would come back for us, too. It made her every step and movement a little stab of insecurity, and it's true, we didn't take her for granted anymore, and we stopped trying to torment her, but every moment spent with her we watched for a sign—a twitch of the face, a long sigh and glance away out the window, an empty smile in response to our jokes—anything that meant she was already planning to leave.

On her first day back, she said she wanted to have “a memorial service” since we couldn't go to Bernie's funeral, and after she had us all say the thing we would miss about Bernie the most, we all sang a hymn and she read a verse about dust returning to the ground. She told us he was definitely in heaven, and we felt a little better, but we still thought about what we'd heard her say before.

One thing that changed: after Nurse Angie came back from New Orleans, she began to stay through the night too.

“In case there’s an emergency,” she explained the first night, when we asked. “It’s storm season now, so in case the power goes out, or someone needs me. In case something happens the night nurse”—she never called Nurse D by name—“can’t handle alone.”

For some reason, we clenched our teeth at her helpfulness. If you’d asked us, we would have said how much we loved Nurse Angie, how happy and kind and smart she was, but for her to stay at night—we knew it wasn’t only helpfulness. Nurse D said nothing about it, but she didn’t lead us into the dreams, and though we had done it before without her, we were too nervous with Nurse Angie there to try.

And Nurse Angie began to get tired. In order to stay through the night, she took little naps through the day, dozing for twenty, thirty minutes at her little desk, and some mornings our breakfast was late, or forgotten completely. Some of us, who were older, wondered for the first time if the white children on the first floor had more than one nurse taking care of them. Some of us said we couldn’t remember why we’d ever wanted her to be our mother.

A whole week passed this way—the only times we didn’t see Angie were the two days she had off, but she came back those nights too. Another week passed, and the entire time, we couldn’t dream. We clenched our teeth at night and fought tears as we thought of Della, floating out there alone, or sending out her little hook each night, pleading for us to come and see her, with no way to know why it was we weren’t coming.

And our families, we thought, now that we know how to find them, we have to start trying.

So she became the target of all our frustration, even while we still loved her, even while her face changed into a tired, droopy mask, even when she lost her place during our lessons, when her arms shook as she moved us through our exercises.

Then one night, Nurse D sighed, and set her lamp down on the desk where Angie was

slumped, her head on her hands, asleep.

“Ms. Johnson,” she said softly, and Nurse Angie jerked awake. “Ms. Johnson, this is silly. You need to go home, you’re not doing anybody any good staying here all hours like this.”

“I am,” Nurse Angie said, swallowing and blinking. “I’m doing this for a reason.”

“You just wearing yourself out. Go home and get some real sleep, I’m here with them.”

“Maybe that’s what I’m worried about,” Angie snapped, standing up.

We waited, straining to hear over the engines, but Nurse D said nothing.

“I know what you’re doing,” Angie said after a minute.

“Do you?”

“Yes, I know, I know what you did to that little boy.”

“And what was that?”

“You killed him!” Angie burst out.

“You think I—what?” The little bit of hurt we could hear surprised us. *So she get’s bothered and upset too*, we wondered.

“I know you did. Even if you didn’t open his lung, you still didn’t save him. You didn’t do your job, you just let him die.” Nurse Angie’s voice sounded funny, stretched thin, almost.

“Does it make it easier for you to believe that?”

“Make what easier? I don’t need anything to be easier.”

Nurse D took a big breath, and nodded once at her, then turned back to us, her eyes staring straight into ours in the mirrors.

“All right, now” she said. “Y’all little ones just go on to sleep.”

No, one of us said, *don’t leave, don’t leave* and then another, the rest of us joining, all of us chanting *no don’t leave, no no, don’t, no no no no* at her, our voices just dry-leaf whispers against the noise of the engines.

But still, Nurse D blew out her lamp, and after that, all we could hear was Angie's breathing in the dark.

The next night, the last Nurse Angie would spend with us, she began to go around with a bottle of dark, sour syrup after dinner, giving us each a spoonful. She held our lips shut to make us swallow it, and we asked what it was for.

"It's nothing scary," she said. "Just a little medicine to help you sleep better at night."

We didn't need help sleeping, we whined, we sleep fine. Nurse D helps us sleep deep and slow so our souls could go flying. We don't need medicine for that, and this tastes bad.

She ignored this and continued to going around with her spoon and her firm set mouth. We thrashed our heads and clenched our jaws, spit the syrup onto the ground. Those of us who had already swallowed it started to yell—we don't want it, we wont drink it, we'll tell Nurse D and she wont make us drink it.

"But the night nurse has left," she said, "And she won't be coming back. I will take care of you at night now, too."

She said this simply and clearly, as if it was a natural thing that Nurse D should be gone from our lives, taking everything with her.

One of us began to shriek—a cattailed screech that ripped through the whirring rain and wheezing lungs. Another scream rose, and then another, and another, until we were all screaming together, covering each other's pauses, growing dizzy as our voices thickened and joined, echoing around the ward like a siren for the storm outside and for the first time since our lives had ended, we couldn't hear the heavy breath of the lungs. We felt we could scream forever.

Nurse Angie stood perfectly still in the middle of us, face still, her fist clenched around the bottle of medicine, then pulled her hand back and threw the medicine across the room. The glass

bottle cracked against the bottom edge of Lecia's mirrors, and shattered against the lung above Lecia's head. The brown syrup ran down the metal in black, oily fingers, as if her lung was bleeding, and thick cracks appeared in the panes of her mirror.

We fell silent, so quiet we could almost hear Nurse Angie's breath heaving over the engine noise.

"Why?" she said, her voice shaky. "Why do you treat me like this? After everything, everything I've given up for you."

She turned slowly, staring down at us from our mirrors. "If you ever," she said, "ever do that again, I will turn off your respirators. All of them." She made a choking noise, just once, then walked to her station and put her head down on her desk.

We closed our eyes against each other's faces in the mirror, and each cried for our own mothers, trying to be as quiet as we could. We had never thought about the machines stopping before—we could die inside them, we knew, but even then the lung would keep breathing. Surely it would keep breathing forever.

We woke that night when the storm outside crashed, lightning snapping something big in two. The noise of the room was different, somehow, and we tried to find the difference, the new change. We could barely see past the new cracks in the mirrors, but what we saw were bits of mouths gulping at the air, wild eyes in the dark, slivers of skin slicked with sweat. The lungs had stopped.

One of us called for Nurse Angie, but she didn't respond. She was asleep, her face pressed flat against the desk, and we started to scream, bed by bed, afraid of Nurse Angie's threat, but our breath leaked away and it was all we could do to gasp and fight for air on our own, while the wind passed over us, breaking more and more of the world outside.

But we weren't loud enough. Angie didn't wake up, and we watched some of our faces turning

purple in the dark, begging her to move, to jump up and rush over and make everything okay again, the way she could always do.

The generator snapped back on just an hour or two later, and by the time Nurse Angie woke up and began her rounds, with all of us watching, silent and feeling sick, all of the iron lungs were working again, so that all our eyes were open, each of us breathing in time.

But Lecia and Roberta were dead. Their real lungs weren't strong enough to keep going for so long.

It was Nurse Angie who left us, in the end, replaced by another nurse. She came to say goodbye to us, and we let her kiss us, but didn't say a word. Another day nurse came, and then another, a carousel of changing faces we couldn't track. The world on the other side of the radio went on, still working, still living, then celebrating the end of the war, and the nurse that day wept, saying *it's a miracle, a miracle*. We watched silently, and wondered if she would even hear us if we spoke.

Nurse D came back to us, barefoot and carrying her lamp, and when we said Angie had told us she'd left, she smiled sadly and shook her head.

"Now you know that's just silly," she said, her voice soft. "You know I wouldn't do that. I will never leave you children."

The strangest thing—the cracks are everywhere in the mirrors now, and the tilt of the broken pieces changes our faces, widening our eyes, or re-sculpting our noses. In the mirrors we split and shrink, broadening, then crumpling. It separates us—*whose eye is that blinking*, we think, *whose mouth is*

that moving. Most days, we don't like to look at ourselves, and spend more and more time dreaming and following people who live outside, those who are still alive and still moving through the world we've never been able to find our way back to.