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## Missing

Nobody understood her silence. But it was the square white room that silenced her, the featureless landscape of bed, the tube like a snake feeding on her arm, the icy blue eyes of that young nurse that stilled her tongue. In silence she watched the light come and go, watched the sunrise invade this strange space she now occupied. People came and remained close by her side, sat with her for hours—dreary, silent, inexplicable hours. She watched a progression of uncertain faces as she plucked at the bedspread. Her sister Patricia's sullen homely features hovered before her, that bloodless mouth, those childish eyes smeared with tears and melting mascara, the crucifix dangling its recriminations at her neck. Her own husband, Mark, his huge hands folded, politely waiting, his immense, inarticulate despair suspended above her, enveloping her like autumn rainfall. Sometimes for him she made the effort and broke through with a smile, though in her mind there dwelled darkness and a raw, searing anguish that roamed its conquered terrain like an animal, restless and predatory. When someone spoke, the words came at her like a wintry blast of wind from all directions, questions seeking answers that she tried her best to provide. But every attempt to gather up her thoughts and form them into words of her own ended in failure, as if she were trying to collect confetti with bandaged fingers, as if she were stooping, searching blindly among nettles and thorns. In her blind groping she would panic as an unutterable sadness took hold. But soon the nurse would come and administer a soothing cure, and then the enchantment of sleep would invite her inside once again, into its secret realm.

This time it was a woman seated beside her bed: young, almost pretty. However, thick glasses and a tweedy jacket and an air of clinical detachment concealed what could have been real beauty,

made her appear solid and thick and dowdy. Long flat hair flowed down past the edge of the bed. She was taking notes with a pencil.

'Okay,' she was saying, as she gave her glasses a quick nudge back up the bridge of her nose. 'I think we can get started now.'

Their eyes met, and she refused to look away. She had the feeling this woman was expecting her to look away.

'Claudia, do you recognize me? Do you remember who I am?'

Was she poised now on the edge of an important discovery, or was it simply another question? She watched the woman touch her lip with the tip of the pencil.

'Of course I remember who you are,' she answered, giving no thought to her reply, because nothing mattered, least of all this.

'Who am I, then?' the woman asked, leaning in closer. 'What's my name?'

Claudia could see the woman focus all her energy upon her, as if the next words to issue from between her dry lips would tilt a scale somewhere toward either life or death. She prepared to speak by sucking back a deep breath and wondering how she could be so selfish, using all that air for herself.

'I don't have any idea who you are,' she said, not an admission but a simple statement of fact.

'I see,' the woman said, her face serious as she wrote something down.

'Claudia, my name is Dr. Gibbons. I was on duty the night they brought you in. You spoke to me that night. We talked for a long time. Do you remember what you said? What you told me?'

She made a face. She didn't remember.

'Do you remember anything about that night?' the woman asked. 'Do you remember what you did, or what you tried to do?'

To her surprise, she found the answer on her lips without having to sort through the disordered wreckage of her mind.

'I took some pills,' she said, smiling, strangely proud. 'I tried to kill myself.'

The woman was writing again. Had she really said something worth recording? But her words were so ordinary, it seemed foolish to go to the trouble of setting them down on paper. What could be the reason for all this interest and attention? She would much rather have talked about the wheeled trolleys that rolled up the corridor past her room every day bearing bodies that would never return.

'Can you tell me why?' the woman asked. 'Why you would want

to kill yourself?’

Her fists knotted the bedspread as the recollections swarmed her vision. The forest. The thick foaming clouds. A house with a husband and children. A gleaming white tiled floor. A broad mirror beneath a canopy of light. A fistful of small white pills.

The woman left when she had no more answers to give. By early evening, dinner had been served and the lights had dimmed, tinting the walls a sad, pale grey. Chattering voices from the nurses’ station fled down the corridor and into her room, echoing chiming laughter. A telephone rang, an electronic gurgle. For some reason she had become acutely aware of the other bed, of the person who shared the room with her. She had seen her companion only once, a frail, spectral woman with tufts of white hair sprouting like undergrowth from an ancient head, hands like cracked parchment. They had brought her here to die, and she had descended invisibly into the bed like a body already lost to life, like a creature waiting to drown, waiting for the water to rise and take her. But she was not dead yet. Claudia could hear each rasp of breath that coerced the old heart into motion.

Her feet touched the cool slab of floor. After two weeks nothing held her in place, no tubes remained attached to drain the fluids from her body. She moved about at will, up and down, up and down, and nobody cared. She had been to the solarium and spoken to some other patients, she’d read a magazine, watched TV. Her recovery was imminent, so they said. Soon she would be going home.

The woman lay dying behind a gauzy nylon curtain, hidden away so not to arouse the envy of those still burdened with life. Claudia stood listening to air being drawn in and expelled from old lungs. So much effort, all this breathing, an act of labour rather than of habit, and surely a punishment for living so long. Drawing back the curtain, she allowed her eyes to wander over the withered features and to trace the outline of the childlike body beneath the sheets. The woman lay motionless, immersed in sleep, but it was a different kind of sleep. From this sleep there would be no waking. Up close, the woman’s bones appeared in plain view as if her skin were no more substantial than waxed paper and her flesh already stripped away. And there was the smell, the obscene stench of a body already lost to itself, unaware and unrepentant.

Claudia returned to bed to await the arrival of the wheeled trolley.

'Mother, why do I do these things?'

There was nobody around to hear her. Her mother was long dead, her family was gone. The children were staying with Mark's parents. She was alone now more than ever before. But she kept talking, maintaining a steady flow of messages into the past. Was this because the present was unbearable? Not so. Not really. Mark did not understand her, but then he never had. It had been his idea to remove the children from her care, as if she posed a danger to them. Maybe she had once, back in the days of her depression when her body had seemed a prison she would do anything to escape. But things had changed since then. At the hospital they had explained it to her, her affliction, how the glands in her head had betrayed her and tried to destroy her with their chemicals. All those months she had known something was wrong but had understood only the grief and the shame that followed each incomprehensible act of madness. Yet never once had it been her fault. The mechanism of this imbalance was clearly beyond her control and would never have responded to her wishes anyway. So she felt better about it now. The new medication had eased the pain. These days she suffered little anguish. She was busy, getting on with her life.

As she poured the soil into the pot, some spilled from the leathery plastic pouch and scattered over the lip of the table to the floor. When the pot was filled, she lifted the philodendron cutting from the water and with her fingers dug a hole for the tender network of new roots. More soil crept over the edge of the pot and, perversely, tumbled like a living thing across the table and jumped to the floor. She covered the roots and then pressed the soil down to give them solid earth to grip. The soil fascinated her. She loved the touch of it, this feathery black mulch flecked with white that in visions and daydreams she'd seen herself eating. A heaping spoonful would give her all the strength she needed. It fed the plant, gave it life. Why not her? There *were* times when the thought of real food repulsed her and in order to appear normal she had to play games in her mind to compel herself to eat. Times when meat, bread, corn, licorice, all the things she used to crave lost their allure and seemed to her like so much chaff: inedible, gross. As Mark swallowed his food she

would follow its progress down his throat, breathless, waiting for him to choke. But these aversions passed, and for weeks she would eat whatever he brought home. Anything tasted good. She had grown insensitive to the distinction between turnip and chocolate and with every mouthful felt the blood gush through her veins, felt new flesh accumulate on her bones replacing that which she'd lost.

The little plant wavered on its delicate stalk as she moved it to the shelf by the window. Maybe it would live, maybe it would not. She would do her best to ensure its survival, but that was no guarantee. Some of her cuttings had lived, others had died. She did not feel she had done anything differently with the ones that had died.

On her tongue, the soil that had seemed so enticing to her fingers—so silken and fluffy that she wanted it inside her—was suddenly coarse and laced with grit. It congealed like mud and filled her mouth with a sour bitterness that stifled her breathing. Shutting her eyes against the bowl of black soil waiting for her on the table, she chewed slowly. Tiny stones crunched between her teeth. With her tongue she forced the lump of mud apart and opened her throat to receive it.

The cat pawed a small rounded cavity for itself in the pile of old blankets. Rosemary. What a dumb name for a cat, Mark had said. But she didn't care. It was her cat. She'd call it what she liked. For now, Rosemary sounded just fine, and the name held the added appeal of being familiar. She'd had an aunt named Rosemary. To this explanation Mark had responded with the patronizing and anxious smile he wore so often of late. She could almost hear the alarms sounding in his head.

'Puss, puss! Come here, Rosemary,' she said, and wiggled her fingers as a further inducement.

The cat stiffened its ears and observed her with evident curiosity. Then in its trusting fashion it leaped from the bed of blankets and followed her up the stairs to the kitchen.

She understood Mark's impatience with the slow pace of her recovery. It was taking far too long. She was disappointed also but resisted bringing it up with her doctor for fear she would be told this was as good as it would get. Mark plainly wished for her to resume the role she had played before the illness. She had been his equal in every way: active, involved, helpful with the

children. They had shared the cooking and the other household chores. For a while she had even been working part time at the high school marking papers, tutoring those in need of extra help. But somewhere, either during the trauma or as a result of the treatment, she had relinquished that unique essence of selfhood, lost touch with the part of her that distinguished whoever she was from everyone else. She had grown passive and accepting, dispirited and listless. And there were other difficulties. Passages in her mind remained barricaded against the flow of reason. She could sometimes only get so far and then didn't know how to proceed because something stood in her way, something dense and massive. A thought would emerge from between her lips half baked, stunted and frightening in its deformity. She embarked upon her chores as usual but rarely completed anything: a trip to the grocery store had resulted in a comic book and some juice crystals but none of the things they needed; a load of laundry was left abandoned—sodden towels sitting in a basket beside the dryer—and only because she had encountered a barrier that resisted her every attempt to climb over it. Cruelly, Mark had called her drugged and stupid. This was during one of their arguments about sex. He was growing restless. The tension building in his muscles made her think of tightly filled catheter bags.

The mewling cat performed a figure eight between her feet. On the counter, she sliced away a small section of the orange fish flesh and dropped it to the stone floor. The cat slurped it up, barely pausing to chew. What a relief it was, to be allowed the use of a real knife again after all this time. She carved out another piece and let it fall, and in a second it too was gone. The knife made it so easy, but still, how could she do something like this, knowing so clearly that it was wrong? This was the trout Mark had bought for their supper. She was supposed to douse it with flour and seasonings and then bake it in the oven. This was what she had promised and prepared and fully intended to do. All the ingredients were lined up, waiting. But instead she was feeding it to the cat, and would continue to do so until it was gone or until the cat lost interest. How could she be doing this?

A few moments later the cat lay grooming itself, sated, at her feet. Through the window she watched the mangled birch tree shudder and coil in the high wind. Farther from the house, beyond the scrubby cluster of spruce and pine, the lake slapped

the shore and deflected highway sounds up her way through the forest.

Things were no longer quite so clear to her. The whys and the wherefores eluded her grasp. Her step echoed too loudly, causing an ache in her heart. The ceilings of the old house were too high, she could lose her way because of them. Danger signs were all around: patterns depicting agony and torment that leaped out at her from the wallpaper; the uneven tines of a broken fork; the sharp, treacherous corner of the railing which caught her elbow again and again; the murder of crows circling outside, chanting her name.

Yet Mark was satisfied that life was getting back to normal. On Sunday afternoon he brought the children home. She recognized them as one recalls the faces of distant childhood friends. Troy and Adam and Sarah. Impulsively, she gathered them in close and hugged each of them to her heart. But she was afraid. They had become people she didn't know. During the months of her confinement they had learned to depend on each other and now inhabited a private realm of whispered secrets and exclusive rites. Adam, the youngest. She had missed fully a tenth of his life. He stood a few inches taller and wore clothes she didn't recognize, things that Mark's mother must have scrounged at a church sale. Sarah, the oldest, pale and willowy in loose overalls, a shirt, and dirty sneakers. The boys clung to her, sapping her strength. The middle child, Troy, whose eyes revealed a depth of suffering, a dark maturity and seething resentment. He said nothing and froze within the circle of her arms, his awkward smile rapidly fading when she betrayed ignorance of his best friend's name. It was true, she had forgotten. Her mind was a sieve. She needed a bucket to catch the drips.