

Georgia Park
Hot Pink Iron Lung

My mother had me fitted into my iron lung during my last overdose on barbiturates. "I had it made and shipped to the back door," she later told me, "after the last time you stopped breathing. Honey, I just felt so helpless. I couldn't go through that again, and I thought we might as well cut out the embarrassment with the doctors while we're at it. Save us all a trip. Thank God, the drugs made you thin enough for me to lift and position you into the thing. You were barely ninety pounds then, bless your scrawny little soul."

Yeah...thank God, I wanted to retort. I didn't say it out loud only because that ability had already been taken by the last overdose. We are told that when we die, our souls leave our bodies. My brain lost connectivity with my mouth that night, but nothing else happened. The truth is, I did die, but even if I could talk, I wouldn't hurt my mother's feelings by divulging that information. She tries so hard to keep me hanging on. I wonder if she knows.

She knows how hard I had tried to die. I had tried in boardinghouses across the city, next to the shoes left outside the doorsteps of Asian families living in a single room, breathing the warm, musky smell of Middle Eastern dishes wafting from the rooms upstairs. I almost died in those hallways. I tried again in the various studio apartments and fire escapes of various skinny kids, needles in our veins and powder on our noses. Then I would try walking home alone, with a tank top baring my shoulders to lean against rough brick walls and faltering flip flops introducing the soles of my feet to the hot pavement of the sidewalks and streets. I didn't care if it was a high or a low. I tried. Nothing really hurt back then, aside from the occasional withdrawal.

Trying to fit my key in the door of my mother's house at the end of the journey back was always the hardest part. Which key was it, and was the trick of fitting it in at the right angle or was something wrong with the size or shape of the thing? More importantly, when was it appropriate to give up? Exercising my fine motor skills usually exhausted me to the point of slipping down to the pale pink welcome mat to our front door and having a rest there.

"Geraldine, GERALDINE, wake up!" My mother would scream when she came home to discover me slumped against our door. She'd slap me across the face several times before inevitably dragging me into the living room to have a longer chat in my general direction. At which point I'd tune in and out, always propped up against a pastel colored wall like one of my mother's rag dolls.

Eventually my mother cupped her hand under my chin and lifted my brown eyes to look into the twins of hers. "We need to talk about why you're trying to kill yourself, ok?"

I never got the opportunity to tell her before she sacrificed my voice in order to 'save me from myself'. Not that I ever would have.

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To mother's credit, though, she did try to make the confinement fun. She nicknamed my metal casket "Lungy" and painted it hot pink. She would bring home stickers from various skate stores and coffee shops around San Antonio and let me choose where to place them. She even had air conditioning installed on the inside of it, like they do with the animal suits at Disney World.

I knew she had reason to like Lungy. Not only did Lungy help me breathe, but it also kept my hands clean of drugs. I guess it's unsurprising that I was finally able to keep them clean once they were physically contained, constantly bound to my sides.

At first, it was just me, mother and Lungy. I was twenty. I say at first, because that's when I believe my life began. Certainly, it's when I began to see the world, or at least our lavender colored living room with its the phony flowers and the throw pillows, through clear eyes. It looked like the inside of an Easter egg. The main reason mother had switched me to that room was so that she could have a more or less constant view of me, and I could have a view onto the front yard. She thought I would grow to appreciate that. She would occasionally sit on the loveseat behind me and point things out; my old tire swing measuring the intensity of that day's wind, the neighbors that walked by but never looked in, the occasional jackrabbit.

Mostly, though, I just watched mother. She would wander through the room to dust her little horse figurines and re-fluff the couch pillows throughout the day, talking on the phone more often than not.

I knew those horse figurines well. Over the past year, I had given each of them a name and had them develop relationships and rivalries with each other. Henry was having an affair with Henrietta the Hermaphrodite from down the row. Of course, because of Henry's strict protestant upbringing, prudish wife and young children, I never witnessed one of his rendezvous with Henrietta, but I saw the way their eyes locked. In addition to the private lives of her horse figurines, my mother's own private life seemed fascinating to me. I lived to see her walk through the living room, and even better, to hear her on the phone, "He said what? Well, no wonder she's divorcing him! I would've too!" "No, not Mary with the daughter at Dartmouth, Mary who keeps trying to kill herself. You know, the one with the body odor who works at J. Jill? Good lord, is she ugly! Bless her soul, the last two attempts didn't work."

So often, by her middle-aged years, so many things seemed to turn out to be such a shame. Luckily for her, mother thrived on getting inside knowledge of other people's shame. Brain tumors, financial failures, car crashes, separations and delinquencies, juvenile or otherwise, my mother was the first to know. She really kept in touch with the community.

Nothing perked her up like the announcement of terrible news. "Oh yeah?" I'd hear her gush on the phone, "You mean Jerry, the crackhead? No! Did she report him to the police? Was anyone hurt? No! You don't mean to tell me-" by the time she finished a phone call like that, she'd be humming showtunes and Christmas carols all throughout the house. I guess it made our plight look more manageable to her by comparison. It seemed to take her mind off minor things like our plush rose rug being

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overdue for a cleaning, or her own dwindling interest in her dead and hopefully convalescing daughter.

Funny, then, that she kept me such a secret. Shrank from the community in the last year with vague excuses that she wasn't feeling well, had better stay in tonight. Or maybe because she didn't want other people to take joy in her scandal, knowing firsthand how vicious that joy can be. How satisfying.

In the mornings, especially after a phone call bearing no horrible news at all, I had her full attention. That was our hair and makeup time. She'd roll Lungy right outside the bathroom and use the extendable shower head to wash my lank, dark brown hair over a bucket. I had thin hair compared to her blond, streaked bouffant, just as I was pale and thin to her plump and rosy cheeked. My eyebrows were thicker than hers, but her thighs were thicker and her breasts were bigger than mine. Other than that, we looked the same. Same pointed nose, same pouty mouth.

She made an effort to add some volume to my hair, always careful to be sure the temperature was to my liking, testing the water on her fingers before my scalp. She continued to tweak the temperature even then, until I smiled and closed my eyes. I liked the water much hotter than she would venture was comfortable. She always started me off with lukewarm water, thinking, I supposed, that someday I might still change my preference to anything less than scalding hot.

Mother was a beauty school dropout who still liked to play dress up and talk about her glory days while washing my hair. "I would never have dropped out of that school if it weren't for your father." She'd sigh. "Oh, of course, money's nice, Geraldine. But I had friends at that school. If there's one thing money can't buy, its friendship. At least with love you can get a prostitute! Go on a dating site! But hang on tight to your friends." I raised my eyebrow. What friends? I thought. I turned my head to look up at her, with a carefully constructed expression of consternation. What friends? I insisted.

She faltered. Frowned and looked away. "Oh honey, we haven't had much company to the house this past year, have we? I just don't know what people would say. You know, iron lungs went out of style years ago."

I felt an expression of sadness overcome me. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. My mother's hands never stopped lathering, even during one of those times, like now, when her voice shook. I looked into her eyes searchingly until I found guilt. Then I looked away. Closed my eyes.

"Oh, I know! How about a nurse?" I cast a glance upwards and she rewarded it with her face lit up like a Christmas tree. I smiled. She bore me relatively young, and now she was barely forty. She still had great ideas and velour track suits to match her ambitions. She had an exercise machine she called a "stepper" and now, I could tell by her expression, she had research to do and phone calls to make.

"Really, all you need is your feeding tube refilled, catheter emptied and...Well, maybe if there were days I wasn't here...you know, maybe if I wanted to go out, or even...take a weekend away..." She was faltering. I suddenly understood that she had been feeling held back. She still consid-

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ered herself to be in her prime, and, aside from me, she was single. Maybe she felt tethered to this pastel house by a young, pale daughter in her metallic pink and utterly unspeakable casket. Who's to say the patterns she really wanted to see weren't all flannel, work boot and jean-clad? I felt my face grow hot.

"Honey, I love doing your make-up and spending time with you. Every morning I'm here. But, well, I have friends I go out and see. Or I used to. You should have friends that come in to see you. A companion, people do that. Maybe a beautician, like me. Or like I would've been. And a nurse. Then, baby, if I wanted to go away for the weekend. Well, I'd bring you back something real nice every time. A souvenir!" She eyed her horse figurines. "We can start you up some sort of collection. Maybe castles, or little angels?" I wrinkled my nose.

"Ok, you don't like that." She wrung out my hair and wrapped it in the oversized, fluffy towel she'd kept waiting around her shoulders. "But what about the nurse idea? A companion? Someone to do your hair and makeup and talk to you if I go away for the weekend?" Her tone was hopeful. I had been looking back at the living room window at the old oak tree. It had always been in our front yard, even before the first day of my life, the day I conjoined with Lungy.

I wasn't sure I liked change. But I had come to love my mother very much. I smiled at her.



What followed my mother's idea was a different type of phone call. "Gloria! I haven't talked to you in ages. Don't you think it's about time we caught up? Call me!" It wasn't the phone call that was different, exactly, my mother was nothing if not a social butterfly. But her voice was false, and I recognized the name Gloria. I shot my mother a puzzled look when she finally walked by me in the living room.

"Geraldine, I'm going to make you a friend! I can't believe I ate shit and called Gloria, but she's the only friend I really had in beauty school, and I know she knows people. We also don't have to worry about her blabbing, with the amount of dirt I have on her, she better just watch herself as is!" I raised my eyebrows.

"Oh, I shouldn't tell you. I promised her I'd never tell a soul, and we don't want to bring bad juju around right before she starts keeping our secret for us. On the other hand...who are you going to tell, am I right?"

My mother sat to the pink loveseat parallel to Lungy and braided my hair away from my ear. Then she whispered Gloria's secret into it. Apparently, her son had been molested by one of her boyfriends when he was young, and it was all Gloria could do to keep him out of trouble as an adult. But the real horror of the whole thing was, Gloria never called the police or did anything to stop it. She didn't want to give up the guy. She kept him around until he left her for another woman with small children, at which point she sobbed to my mother over tea, deep, gasping sobs, and admitted everything she had sacrificed for the son of a bitch. She begged my mother not to tell anyone, of course. And technically, my mother never had.

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But while I was listening to my mother's scandalous gossip, all I could think about was the fact that she was right, I could never tell anyone the secret, anyways. So, if she had technically kept her promise not to tell anyone, did that make me not anyone to her? The question kept me up all that night.



The phone rang the next day around three. We didn't have a clock in the living room, but I understood by then that when the sun was visible next to the uppermost windowpane, it was early afternoon.

"Hello? ...Gloria, so nice to hear back..." My mother wandered around the house, sometimes stopping with one hand on her hip, staring out the window. Sometimes folding both hands in front of her chest, and sometimes disappearing to a part of the house where I couldn't see or hear her. "Well, the thing is, honestly, I'd prefer a beautician to a nurse. Anyone can be taught to change a catheter, but those nurses take themselves so seriously. Plus, aren't they mandated reporters? Right. Not like I'm doing anything wrong, but....Exactly. Oh Gloria, I knew you'd understand. Do you know anyone?"



I woke to my mother laying on the plastic covered purple loveseat parallel to Lungy and I, stroking what felt like circle designs into my cheek.

"Geraldine," She whispered, and I opened my eyes to blink at the ceiling. "Good morning, sweetie. Guess what?" I looked at her, and she smiled. "We're having company today!"

My mother hadn't done her own hair and make-up yet. She must have woken up in the middle of the night to come sleep next to me. She looked so drawn without her makeup, her lips pale as the circles under her eyes were dark, her plump cheeks not looking rosy at all, but white as my own. I caught sight of a couple spare greys in her unkempt bouffant. She looked as drained as I used to feel when I sank down to the floor. I wanted to reach out and stroke her cheek back, but of course, I couldn't.

"I think I finally know how you used to feel when you would run away, sweetie. I feel like I'm drowning here sometimes with you." Here, she avoided my eyes. "I remember when we first got Lungy. Honey, your catheter would overfill and I would leave you there, avoiding opening Lungy for as long as I could. I knew you were wet, and then I knew your pants must've dried after a certain amount of time, and that made me feel better. But I have to admit, I haven't taken very good care of you at all." I took my eyes off hers and turned in the other direction. I remembered the smell of urine, the wet in my pants that turned cold after only a few minutes, the itch as it dried, the discomfort. The footsteps trying to move as quietly as possible in and out of the front door, avoiding me.

I wanted to tell her that she'd gotten better. I looked back at her, painful as it was, and smiled. After all, she was all I had now. I sensed her slipping away from me again, and that was the last thing I wanted.

"Everything will be different now. Gloria's sending her own son to come take care of you. You were so little, I don't know if you'll remember,

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but you two played together when you were toddlers. Remember Robby Jr?" Robby Jr? I thought, one of the beautician's sons...the one who'd been molested? I remembered playing Barbie dolls with a little towheaded boy. I remembered wondering where his sister was and if she'd be angry he was playing with all of her Barbie dolls. Then I remembered him ripping the head off of one of them and using it as a ping pong ball.

"He's all grown up now, anyways, and following in Gloria's footsteps, a beautician. Probably gay, although Gloria would never admit it if he was. I don't want to interview anyone we don't know personally for the role of your caretaker, so I'm really hoping this goes well, sweetheart. Will you do me a favor and smile at him? I know you haven't given me much trouble in the last couple of years, but you were such a handful before Lungy. Promise me you'll behave?"

I was becoming nervous. My mother had never talked about her neglect of me in Lungy before, never made these confessions, never told anyone about me as far as I knew. We certainly hadn't had any outside visitors since I had been conjoined with Lungy. I turned my head away only to hear her sigh and the plastic of the loveseat cover crinkle as she made her way into the bathroom. She knew me well. For the first time in over a year, I found I didn't want to behave. I heard the bathroom door shut and the shower turn on as I gazed out the window. The sun was high in the sky by then, the clock on the cable box reading 9:00 am.

I bet he'd come for dinner, so mother could liquor him up a bit before the introductions. Not that she couldn't do the same at brunch, but if it were brunch she would've been ready hours early and had something in the oven by now. She wouldn't have found the time to softly etch circles into my cheek with her manicured nails or make undue confessions.

There wasn't a lot of traffic on our street. It must have been a windy day outside, because my old tire swing was swinging back and forth from the elm tree as steadily as a pendulum. I preferred to count the tiny holes in our ceiling tiles rather than watch the sun slowly change position in the sky or watch the tire swing moving with the wind instead of with me. The last time I used the swing it was to avoid going inside at the end of the school day. I might have been ten, but already starting my teenage angst. I'd listen to the alternative rock station on my Walkman and twist around, letting the rope untwist me over and over. My mother was usually out until nightfall anyways in those days. After work, she liked to go out drinking. My dad was gone by then.

I fall asleep on the two hundred and thirty-third hole in our ceiling, before I even hear the shower turn off.

By the time I wake up, there is the smell of a roast coming from the oven, and my mother is prancing around in the living room with her silver heels on. Her perfume is so strong it might have been just the thing that woke me up, even from clear across the room, where she is dusting Henrietta's father, Richie.

I wonder if Richie knows about Henrietta's affair, and if so, how he feels about it. Would he reveal it to Henrietta's mother, or try to protect her from the truth, seeing as how she was missing a leg, and already placed behind the rest of the family to hide her own disfigurement? Even though

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Henrietta's parents supported her throughout her gender identity crisis, I feel sorry for both families involved in the extramarital love affair. A lot of horse figurines are going to be hurt when the truth comes out, I think. My mother is humming a Christmas song nervously, warping the intended tune into what sounds like electronica.

I'm so absorbed in the horse figurines, as I usually am before falling asleep and right after waking up, that it takes me a minute to gather from my mother's dress and nervous energy that it must be go time. She's in her maroon dress, with the Spanx on, from the looks of it. She's also wearing her pearls with the jade elephant medallion, always a conversation piece, just a little aside from the traditional simple strand. That probably means she was afraid there wouldn't be much to talk about and has been rehearsing anecdotes from her long-ago trip to China as a plan B.

Then, predictable as clockwork, my mother spots me awake, "Geraldine, have I ever told you about my trip abroad to China when I was in high school? Oh, it was awful," she says, as if to herself, turning back to her figurines. "All that smog, and those poor people. You could just feel the oppression in the air. I'll tell you; I've never been so happy to be in the good old U S of A as I was after coming home from that trip! Never left home again, in fact! But when I saw that poor little beggar girl selling jewelry, well, my heart went out to her, and the next moment, there I was with this necklace! It's just a coincidence that it happens to be beautiful enough to still wear! Real pearls? Oh, no, dear. My good pearls are upstairs. I have to say; I prefer these sometimes! Sentimental value, you know."

Mother jumps when she hears the knock at the door. It sounds like the police. She shoots me a faltering smile. "Oh, that must be Robby, now." She ventures off of the plush rug and out of my eyesight, her heels clicking over the tile hallway leading up to our front door to receive him.

"Robby! Is that you?"

"Sure is, Mrs. Carella."

"Oh, of course it is! How wonderful. Come in, come in."

I hear clicking heels backwards into the hall, joined by what sounds like a gentleman's tap shoes.

"Should I take my shoes off?" His voice is not one I recognize, not the screech and whine of little Robby Jr. It's a deep and penetrative sound, like bees buzzing. Or flies. My mother's is of a higher pitch than normal. More desperate sounding.

"Oh no, dear, I didn't wear these heels just to leave them at the door. The shoes pull together the whole outfit."

"I agree. You look great."

"Thank you. And you, well, you've certainly grown up, haven't you? Here, come into the kitchen, have a seat. Would you like a drink? A cola, maybe, or some bourbon? Wine? Whiskey? Ginger ale? Coffee, tea? I've got a little milk, here, enough to fill a glass,"

"I wouldn't mind some bourbon."

"Smart man! I'll make one on rocks for each of us."

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In the space occupied by the sounds of clinking ice and more than the usual amount of liquid pouring, Robby misses his opportunity to compliment my mother on her lovely home. Strike one, I think, smugly satisfied. I want him to fail, to be kicked out of our family of two as soon as possible. The more he doesn't know the rules, misses the cues prompting these desired responses: "What a lovely home," "What a lovely dress," "Mothers are Gods' angels sent right down from heaven," the further I can feel from his bee swarm voice, his Barbie head pulling antics, his possible molestation. The safer I can feel, warm in my cocoon.

My wishes are interrupted by the noise of my mother setting Robby's glass in front of him and pulling out a chair for herself to sit on. "So, Robby, your mother tells me she's set up a wonderful duplex for you on Sycamore Street?"

"Yeah, it's nice and roomy. She was hoping I would find someone to share my part, but honestly, I think I'm better off alone. I have enough company as it is and I really don't like too much mess.

"Oh, I completely agree! I'm a bit of a neat freak myself, but I can't stand cleaning up other people's messes. My Geraldine-I trust your mother has told you? Yes, Geraldine, it's tragic, what happened to her, but I have to say, she is so much cleaner now. No crumbs, no roaming around at night, no attitude. Of course, for a mother, it can be hard to be left with so much...nothing. Nothing where there used to be so much something is sad, you know. Even if it's replacing...well, we had some unpleasant times before the accident, but...Anyways, I was just saying, for someone who isn't attached, someone whose not her mother, she's really no trouble to have around. No dishes and no dirt, at least. And she's mute."

"Sounds like a dream roommate."

"Yes! She really would be." Mother sounds relieved while I am feeling more and more unsettled. Unadulterated confessions are not her usual style, and they don't suit her well. "Well, the roast will be ready soon, are you terribly hungry?"

"I am, a little," he admitted.

"Oh, of course you are, poor thing! It's been so long since I had a young man in the house! Let me get some crackers and cheese, the roast will be ready in just about...ah! Here, it looks about done now." The sound of mother creaking open the oven door followed by the scent of a slightly burnt roast wafts in to my nose from the kitchen. She chatters on, nervously, and it sounds like she was setting the table. I wonder what I would enjoy more after over a year without each, the booze or the food. I wonder which would make me more sick after using a feeding tube for as long as I had. My mother chatters on and on.

"You're a little early. Not that I'm complaining, I was on pins and needles to see you again, I haven't seen you since you were...you must have been about six. Do you remember coming here and playing with Geraldine?"

"I don't. But I have to admit, I really don't remember much before the age of twelve."

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"Well, I guess I don't remember too much from my childhood at this point, either. Geraldine became sort of surly when she hit her early teens and said the same thing. But you must at least remember me? Your mother and I were thick as thieves while we were at beauty school, split our childcare right down the middle between us. You were always either at her house with Geraldine or mine. You used to call me Auntie Glo, do you remember? I just loved that name!"

"I'm sorry, I don't remember."

There is an uncomfortable silence. "Ah, well," My mother amends. "We had fun. Your mother and I used to let you and Geraldine make us up. We have pictures, somewhere-you'd put lipstick all over your mother's chin. But I hear you've continued as a beautician?"

"Yeah, I'm mostly self-taught, off of YouTube."

"And those tattoos, are they drawn on?"

"No, these tattoos are real. I designed them myself."

"Ah. Charming. What does that one on your neck mean? I can't quite make it out."

"Oh, nothing in particular. It's all just art to me. Part of the aesthetics, the beautification process. I would love to practice on Geraldine."

"Oh, yes! She is a perfect mannequin! Such a beautiful face. Of course, not nearly as beautiful as mine, but..." I imagine my mother was gesturing toward her face and fluttering her eyelashes, an overexaggerated and overused joke that apparently goes unappreciated by Robby Jr. I start to take an interest in Robby. Tattoos on his neck? Why isn't my mother more put off by that? He doesn't seem to have much personality, yet my mother is striving to charm him. I guess she just really wants those few nights on the town away from me. I want to meet this Robby and compare him the cruel, towheaded boy of my early memories. Maybe he's changed.

"I could even take her home with me tonight. I know the agreement; I have my van here with me. I brought the ramp."

"Oh! That's so wonderful! Of course, you'll have to meet her. Have you had enough to eat, dear? Can I take your plate?"

An assenting grunt, the sound of tables being cleared and my heart fluttering in my chest. They'll be coming to appraise me in just a moment. He's taking me away tonight. In a van. My mother had called a man with neck tattoos and pre-arranged for him to have a van to take me into the night. All for a pre-arranged fee, I'm sure, a large lump sum, and then she fed him roast. She hasn't fed me a roast in years. My heart starts pounding in my ears more violently. I squeeze my eyes shut. I will not open them again until I am being loaded into the van.

I will not reward my mother with a look she could interpret as a nod of assent or a terrified protest. I will not lay eyes on her again. I also no longer want to reveal the monster of Robby Jr. to myself. I will ignore the whole appraisal.

I ignore the wheels of Lungy struggling over the shag carpet then gliding easily over the tiled floor of the front hallway. I ignore my neck rising

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and falling against Lungy as I am jostled out the front door. It's harder to ignore the smell of the plants, the suburban lawn, the night air hitting my pallid face. The first stair, the second, the third, will they lose control of Lungy? No. They should've called for more help, I shouldn't be jostled this much. I feel sick. My wheels on gravel. My wheels on a ramp. A door slamming.

I'm not secured inside the van. I am a thing on wheels inside of a thing on wheels. What kind of an idiot is this idiot? My mother didn't say anything about loading me into a van and not securing me? As the van starts moving, so does Lungy, of course. My head bashes into the front of the storage unit every time Robby Jr. slows or comes to a halt. Once or twice, I'm sure the top of my head hits so hard it leaves bruises. I also assume he can hear the crashing from the storage unit, which has to be directly behind his seat. In any case, he does nothing about it. I fall into long, blank sleeps and wake up thirsty several times over. There are no windows in the back. It's dark the whole time.

I don't know how much more time passes before the van eventually stops. I hear the driver's side of the car open and Robby Jr. coming around the side to open the back door.

"Here we are, dolly, steady as she goes!" His voice sounds a lot more unhinged than it was during the polite dinner conversation with my mother. I want to tell him I'm going anywhere with him, that I need to be with my mother. When I remember that my mother and I seem to hold differing opinions on this subject, I want him to like me better than my mother. I want him to let me into a secret world, do my hair, and talk to me every day. I don't know if I mind being someone's dolly. Then the moment passes, and I am frightened again.

He is a hulking figure with apparent strength behind his dawdling words. He wheels me down a ramp and up one. I guess his place was already wheelchair accessible. Well, of course, what did I expect, a cannonball shot in? I can't see much in the dark and I have no idea how far into the building we've gone. I didn't hear a door shut behind us and I can still smell the outside air. Are there palm trees now surrounding us, cacti? Are we outside or in? Have I lost my sight?

The air smells sweet and I hear cicadas for the first time in over a year. Then again, I haven't been outside in that long.

"You haven't been alive in that long." Robby murmurs as he pushes me along.

Wait a minute, is he listening in on my thoughts? I didn't say that out loud.

"No, you didn't think you could speak at all, did you?" he asks, and I crane my neck to catch an impossible twinkle in his hardened eye. That shuts me up. This can't be real. A false death and an iron lung I can stomach, but being heard again makes all the time I spent imprisoned in my own mouth seem like a waste.

"A false death?" He asks, "You're not so much like your mother. I know you don't have the inclination to fool yourself like she does."

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"I'm dead." I say. It's a statement. He doesn't say anything. "Where are you taking me?" I ask.

"Would you really like to know?" I can't answer that. "I'd like to get you out of your casket, first of all," he offers.

"I'll be crippled after being bedbound so long."

"And yet, your voice sounds fine after half an eternity of not speaking."

"Has it been that long?"

"No, only a year, to get your mother over the grieving process. Would you like to walk again?" He asks.

"What's next?"

"You'll have to wait and find out,"

"Will it be worse than life on Earth was for me?" He doesn't say anything, and I don't either. The cicadas are now screaming in my ears. I can't decide whether I like the sound or hate it.

"I'll wait," he told me.