

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

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PLASTIC BREATH

AFTER SEVEN DAYS OF INTOLERABLE CONFINEMENT, Izzy decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

She had been testing her crippled body since the morning darkness, inundating her extremities with signals to flex, and, with any hard-earned luck, *move*. Her weak arms appeared up to the task; she guessed her weight to be just shy of one-hundred pounds. Her legs, however, remained stubborn, anchoring her to the bed. For all the training she had subscribed to these counterparts, none was more rigorous, more vital than her breathing regimen.

Izzy's relationship with oxygen had always been of a toxic nature. A university athlete who had relied upon her immaculate lungs for victory, it had been an unreliable ankle that decided ten metres from an important finish line was the time to snap, end her career, sink her into the depths of depression, and enrol her in a new, lifelong sport: smoking. Three packs a day, four when she was feeling particularly good (or bad), for fifty years.

And now the ghosts of cigarettes past were preventing her, in spite of her cooperative arms, from liberating herself, and, more importantly, Clara.

Izzy exhaled a laboured breath, painfully inhaled another. She should have been accustomed to it by now, but the air filtering throughout her sanctuary still tasted as artificial as it smelled. She felt the rather stale intake race through her mouth and nostrils, hoping to reach the pair of black bags that kept her going for no real purpose.

Save for Clara.

The clean dose of oxygen reached her ashen lungs, then exited her mouth and nose in another laboured exhalation. Izzy imagined the polluted molecules warning the new wave of respiration about what corruption lay within her.

She looked to her right, locked eyes with the never-blinking Clara, and, with a look that said "Don't you dare move now" —she couldn't risk precious breaths on her roommate's deaf ears—began the arduous journey.

Izzy watched as she willed her right arm across the centimetres that felt like kilometres of bed. The feeble limb made pitiful progress before stopping entirely so she may regain what energy she could.

A surge of anger propelled her arm against the plastic sheet dividing her and Clara. Her hand slid down the thick material until it landed in the crevice between the sheet and edge of the bed. Using this newfound leverage, Izzy began pulling her weight with her right arm, while pushing against the mattress with her left. The juicy idea of giving up had crossed her mind, just as it had when her former severely fit self, besieged by physical and psychological cramps, had desired to slow her run to a crawl at the three-thousand-metre mark. Her conditioned lungs had burned then. Now they were volcanic.

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But the agony and certain death would be worth it. Not only for herself, but Clara, who had never felt a pang in her endless life.

Izzy now found herself at a ninety-degree angle: the top half of her body sprawled laterally across the bed; the bottom half remained affixed to where it had been since she embarked upon this suicide mission of sorts. After a quick mental team huddle with her barely-working parts, she used her right hand to push against the plastic sheet. The damn thing was like a wall of concrete. Her reluctant body threatened to pull the plug on the whole operation, but a little bit of that wholesome anger, and a lot of thinking about what would happen to Clara if she failed, helped free the bottom of the plastic sheet from between the mattresses. Izzy exhaled so deeply, the fog outside of her only window found its way to her eyes.

One breath.

Her vision slowly...

Two breaths.

...slowly...

Three breaths.

...returned.

She felt her old nemesis oxygen assisting her rushing blood to restore her vision. But she knew better; death had brushed past her.

Move it, she urged herself.

Izzy hadn't intended to escape by falling on her head, but as she shimied herself closer... closer... closer, then over... over... over the edge of the bed, it seemed the only way. Her head free of the plastic sheet, the faint aroma of cooking bombarded her olfactory. She couldn't help but sacrifice a valuable breath to take in the recipe she had shared with her daughter long ago. *You're using too much garlic powder*, she thought, the seasoning burning her sinuses. But that was Isabelle: too much or too little of everything.

Her shoulders hanging over the edge of the bed, thinned blood rushing to her head, Izzy wondered—not for the first time—what Isabelle would think when the time came to trudge upstairs, check on her dying mother, and find her however she ended up. *Hopefully, with Clara in my arms*, she thought.

She wondered if her daughter would even care.

The pair of Izzy's had lived a life of few kisses and plenty of bites. Izzy had made the cliché attempts to live via her namesake (Isabelle's ankles were still intact, after all). Her daughter had indeed run; not on the track, but away from home, turning the typical one-off act of rebellion into a quarterly sport. When she was home, Isabelle would blame Izzy for all of her life's unwanted biographic details: the casting out of her father, the selfish act of naming her after herself (never mind the tradition), the reason for her isolating unattractiveness, the asthma and other varieties of respiratory ailments courtesy of her chain-smoking. That her only child had decided to punish her by never marrying, never having children, was not lost on Izzy. Still, when Izzy had become too ill to breathe on her own,

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it was Isabelle who rushed her to the hospital; and it was Isabelle who brought her home, tucked her into bed, and made sure the oxygen tent kept her alive.

But after seven days of intolerable confinement, seven days of embarrassing baths and changes, seven days of no words exchanged save for begrudged greetings and farewells, Izzy had decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

Beloved Clara.

She could no longer see her only friend, but knew she was right where she had left her. *I'm coming*, she thought, hoping the suffocating air out here wouldn't render her a liar.

Like in the old days, when slower competitors somehow cruised past her, good old-fashioned anger fuelled her cause, and she writhed her dangling body further over the edge of the bed like a fish out of water. *A fish that wants out of her damn bowl!* she goaded herself, and grew angrier at her handicap. The fingertips on her right hand touched something cold, hard. It took her a moment to realize she had touched the floor. Her left hand, still pushing against the bunched-up comforter, worked alone to send her over the rest of the way.

In the space of seconds, Izzy saw the ceiling, then her abdomen, then her legs, the latter two crashing down on her. Within the same seconds, she had felt emptiness beneath her, then the same cold, hard floor forcing itself into her neck and spine. Precious breaths were knocked out of her, and the fog returned, this time most certainly accompanied by death.

It took her a few moments to realize that death smelled an awful lot like garlic. A few more moments, and Izzy understood she hadn't died... and that her daughter wouldn't have heard a thing if she had. She remained alone. On the floor. Alive. For now.

Alive enough to save Clara.

Slowly, surely, Izzy wriggled away from the bed until her dumb legs hit the floor. Still, her daughter remained downstairs, oblivious, or willfully so. But in case obliviousness turned to awareness, Izzy needed to move as quickly as her lame body would allow at this late stage in the race. *Last one-hundred metres*, she implored.

Since sitting herself up was impossible, she needed to figure out how to get Clara to come down to her level. *Could've just grabbed her, and brought her into the tent*, she scolded herself, *save yourself this stupidity*. But she knew it wouldn't have been fair to Clara, to have her lifelong companion go from breathing one brand of plastic air to another. No. She wanted Clara's first breath to be one-hundred-percent, certifiable oxygen... even if it was tinged with garlic.

Izzy flexed the fingers on her left hand, expecting to feel a break, akin to that long-ago ankle, that would prevent her from crossing *this* finish line. Everything felt in working order. Hand shaped like a spider, the fingers crawled along the floor until they found the nightstand's feet. They climbed past the bottom drawer, then the middle, then-

She stopped, having reached as high as she could go. She looked at the

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progress her hand had made, and was angered and disappointed to see the tips of her fingers so close to the top. So close to Clara.

No longer able to uphold itself, her arm fell to the floor for her daughter not to hear. Her shallow, disparate breathing became shallower, more disparate. The retinal fog grew thicker. And she was certain the last time she would see Clara was in the memories she had very limited time to relive:

Sneaking into her late mother's bedroom—this very same bedroom—to sneak a peek at Clara, high on her shelf.

Receiving Clara on the eve of her mother's passing—in this very same bedroom—on the condition that she pass Clara on to *her* daughter, should she have one, when her own end was near.

Asking Isabelle to take Clara off the shelf, and sit her on the nightstand; the plan to release Clara had been confirmed, all the more so by her daughter's routine sneer and remark: "Ugly thing." Even had Isabelle loved Clara as much as she had, Izzy felt it *her* duty to finally free her.

Come on, you useless cigarette-holder. Last fifty metres.

Her nicotine-stained spider-hand rediscovered the nightstand's feet, and, once more, began its ascent.

Past the bottom drawer.

Forty metres.

Past the middle drawer.

Thirty metres.

Past the bottom of the top drawer.

Twenty metres.

Finding the top drawer's knob...

Ten metres.

...where it hung...

Come on.

...unwilling to move.

COME ON!

Her hand sprang back, the drawer with it.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Until the heavy piece abruptly stopped, having reached its limit. The nightstand leaned slightly forward, and Izzy glimpsed her legacy as the dead meat filling of a floor-and-nightstand sandwich. But the nightstand had other plans; before it settled back into place, it made sure to shake free the tall, glossy box.

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The impact was painful, a sharp corner hitting her perfectly in the eye, but nothing compared to the torture her lungs were putting her through. Instead of fog, there was rain. Izzy blinked the burning tears away, bringing not the nightstand into focus, but a face.

And what a beautiful face it was. Skin made of meringue. A faint smile on pink lips barely formed. Rosy cheeks forever pinched into dimples. Black eyebrows arching over a pair of unblinking bejewelled eyes. Had they seen Izzy? *All* the Izzy's? From Grandma Izzy to this sorry-excuse-for-an-Izzy?

They stared at each other for some time, Izzy refusing to blink, like her little friend, lest she slip into death during one of those slivers of blackness. The smell of garlic was fading. She couldn't tell if her daughter was altering the recipe in some way, or if her senses were gradually shutting down.

Last ten metres, she thought. Perhaps her final thought.

Izzy used the left hand that made this final reunion possible to locate the pristine cardboard flap above Clara's head. Not with anger, but love, Izzy tore open the lid that had sealed the doll in her prison for three generations, and watched as Clara took in her first-ever breath of fresh air.