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Bed Rest

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BED REST

We're just pulling the curtains around so as not to frighten the other parents.

That's not what she says. But it is what she means. What she actually says is, "We're just pulling the curtains around for privacy." The curtains go *shush* as they horseshoe around, hiding us in a thick pocket of privacy.

I stare at the curtains, rather than the incubator. They are criss-crossed with local landmarks in green and beige. They must have been made specially. It costs so much to watch television in hospital nowadays, but in Exeter you can watch the curtains instead. I trace the fabric map of the city with gritty eyes: the Cricklepit Suspension Bridge, the cathedral, the clock tower and the river as it bends and curls around and in-between them all. Right at eye level is a picture of the hand operated cable ferry that runs across the river about a mile away from my parents' house.

The summer I was seven it was hot and the weeks spread out in a buttery stretch of yellow. Our small garden buzzed and twitched with thousands of wriggly, crawly things. What was left of the grass was brick-warm and dust crusted. Lying on it had me in big trouble with Dad for making more washing. The bright evenings were fraught with leg ache and sleeplessness, occasionally broken by the manic chimes of the ice cream van.

"Stupid van," Dad used to say. "Waste of money. I'll kill him if he wakes your mother up."

The ice cream van came round in the day too, and it stopped almost directly outside our house. Children burst out of front doors all down Burnthouse Lane. Like the rats in the Pied Piper, they swarmed around the van, pushing each other to be first and chasing down the street as the ice cream man drove away. Emily and I used to watch from behind the garden gates. We weren't allowed to play out with the other children.

"What sort of parents let their children roam the streets?" Dad said.

We peered through the gates and watched the other children playing. Sometimes they came and chatted to us through the bars.

“Why don’t you just come out?” they said. “Just open them up.”

But we didn’t dare. We didn’t want to make things worse.

The agreement to keep quiet was unspoken but nonetheless binding. Neither Emily nor I mentioned Mum to anyone. We barely mentioned her to each other. Mum had been in bed all summer. She was having bed rest. She had preeclampsia—preeclampsia, I thought at the time and I imagined her stomach eventually opening like an enormous white shell to reveal the baby hiding under her stretched skin.

Mum was confined to the master bedroom where she lay in a passive, swollen pile. We weren’t allowed in the room unless Dad said so. When we did go in she would graft a smile on, but it was temporary and usually peeled away within minutes. It smelt bad in there. It occurred to me that Dad didn’t like the smell either because he was sleeping on the sofa. I thought that he shared my disgust of her as she lay sweating on the bed, full of my brother. But I was wrong. Whenever I tried to ally myself with his repulsion he flattened me.

“What smell? What are you talking about? Don’t be so rude.”

It seemed like my brother was expanding into Mum’s arms and legs, growing furiously in the heat like the ponderous, baby-headed sunflowers we’d planted in the early spring. Her lack of restraint was frightening. What if she grew and grew like the enormous turnip or the dog called Digby who was the biggest dog in the world?

“Don’t be silly,” said Dad. “It’s natural, it’s just biology. Everything will get back to normal.”

Dad’s high school biology class might have found his confidence reassuring, but I didn’t. Mum used to be small and neat. She was ugly spread out all over the place and she just kept on growing.

While it was my prerogative to imagine the worst, it was Emily’s to act as if it had already happened.

“Your sister is *sensitive*,” Dad would say, as if it was something wonderful.

Emily was delicate, easily hurt. She sucked up emotion like a vacuum cleaner. At times she was puffed with it.

“What’s wrong?” we would ask.

Sometimes she would share her sadness, but it was carefully rationed.

“What’s the matter darling? Come on, tell us,” Mum and Dad said.

They spent many enjoyable moments engaged in this form of alchemy, searching for the correct combination of reassurance and placation to heal Emily’s wounds.

In the early days of bed rest, Emily and I used to sneak upstairs and crawl into bed with Mum. She listened to us chatter and sometimes read us stories. But as it got hotter, Mum got fatter and more tired and Dad said enough was enough; we weren't to bother her.

Emily continued to sneak up the stairs on her own. Sometimes Mum didn't mind and Emily would be gone for a while. Other times Mum rang the bell on her bedside table and Dad stomped upstairs to remove Emily.

"It's too hot," he'd say to her. "Mummy's uncomfortable and she's sore from the injections. You're five—a big girl now."

The nurse came every day to inject iron. She was due on the day near the end of the holidays when Emily made a final attempt to invade Mum's rest. Dad was emptying the washing machine with seething impatience, dragging the tangled intestine twist of clothes into the basket. He lacked Mum's patience. He cooked the meals and vacuumed aggressively. He chuntered as he ironed, remonstrating with the creases.

Mum's bell rang and Dad huffed out of the kitchen and up the stairs. He returned with Emily in his arms and planted her on the floor next to the washing machine. Immobilised by hurt, she lingered like a little ghost. I gave her a push then a pull into the garden.

She wouldn't play explorers or collect brown-tipped rose petals to make perfume. She wouldn't come and look when I started turning over stones to check for beetles and woodlice. Even the frenzied chimes of the ice cream van failed to elicit a response. She was stiff with misery. So when the ice cream van pulled up I snuck through the garden gate, crossed the road and stood in the wriggling swarm of children. Eventually it was my turn.

"I'd like an ice cream please," I said.

"Do you have any money?"

I'd forgotten about that.

"No. But if you just wait here, I'll go and get some."

I ran back across the road, through the gate, past the catatonic Emily and into the kitchen, colliding with Dad who was on his way to hang out the washing.

"The ice cream man's waiting," I said. "I told him to wait while I get some money. It's not for me, it's for—"

He dropped the washing basket.

Maybe the blood rushed to my head as he lifted me in the air and flung me over his knee. Perhaps I was looking at the geometric pattern

on the linoleum as he hit me. When I remember it though, I am standing next to Emily, my mouth a big O of surprise, watching myself flailing and shouting as the ice cream van tinkles into the distance and Dad expels five weeks of bed rest frustration on my backside.

Emily cheered up after that. The nurse came to give Mum her injection, and after lunch Dad produced a doll which was probably meant to be a present from my baby brother when he eventually made an appearance. "It's been a rotten holiday," he said by way of apology as he handed the doll to me. It was clearly a bribe, offered in exchange for my forgetfulness, but I was determined to exact revenge by remembering. Seven is old enough to bear a grudge.

The doll had a soft body and plastic hands and feet. Her head was also plastic and her hair poked out in waving, ash-blond tufts. Her eyes opened when she was upright and closed when she was horizontal. She was wearing a pair of blue corduroy trousers and a knitted sweater.

"Let's go for a walk," Dad said. "Just down to the river."

And that's the trip I remember as I stare at the cable ferry, suspended on the hospital curtain in front of me.

My baby is in the transparent incubator that already resembles a coffin. Apparently it's for the best. It's just a matter of time. It's no longer if, but when. That explains the curtains. No dying in public, please.

Emily is murmuring into the incubator's half open porthole. I can't hear what she's saying and I'm glad. Andrew called her when I went into labour. I caught snatches of his, "Far too early," his "What are we going to do?" and his, "Please come," in between contractions. Of course she came.

Andrew is sleeping in the parents' room.

I can't sleep. "Just go and have a *rest*," one of the nurses says. I nod and she leaves me alone.

Mum and Dad *popped by* three times yesterday. They tried to make it sound as if they'd only come because they happened to be passing.

"We've just come to say hello," Dad said.

"James sends love to you and his little niece," Mum said each time, as if my brother had phoned from university between every one of their visits to send another piece of his love.

As I scrutinise the curtains Emily, sits in what has become her chair. She has soaked up all the grief around us like a piece of blotting paper. If she jumped on the spot, I bet I could hear it sloshing around inside her.

This ward is tucked away on the top floor of the hospital. It hides here like a terrible secret. When they first brought my baby up from maternity last week, she was lying on her front. She was conscious and her shoulder blades stuck out like tiny wings. Her skin was baggy—as if I'd made it too big on purpose, for her to grow into—her arms and legs translucent, spindling out of her prone body in capellini threads. She seemed ancient: a tiny, old woman covered in whorls of bearded hair.

Now she is on her back, floored by kidney failure. Every spare fold of wrinkly, baby skin has ballooned with fluid. She is pearly smooth, shining as she stretches. The respirator expands her pneumonic lungs with the steady thwack of a hiccup. Tubes tentacle everywhere.

Emily talks to her. I can't say anything. Shameful thoughts have been creeping around my mind all morning. If I open my mouth, they might erupt into words. Thoughts like this one: although it's written on her tags, I can't call her by *that* name. It wasn't meant for a baby like her. It's my favourite name, and now I'll never get to use it. And this: I'm going to have to change banks. There's this cashier at my bank. He was so friendly. *How long now, love?* I never want to see him again.

I've stopped touching her through the porthole in the side of the incubator. I'm actually a bit scared of her. I hope no-one expects me to have the coffin at home. What happens when people do that? Where do they put it? Perhaps people might want to come and *see* her. Well they can piss off.

While I was mooching around, swollen and smug, chatting to strangers about due dates and ultrasound scans, it was all about to go wrong and I didn't even know it. All that benevolence and self-satisfaction, basking in the outpouring of goodwill, watching myself in shop windows, entirely unprepared for the trick my body was about to play on me: stupid cow.

"We'll just whizz her up to special care," they said after she was born. "Help her breathe. Give you a rest."

Special care, whizz: *Intensive Care, rush.*

She's going to need a little bit of help: *Shit, this baby's even smaller than we were expecting.*

Nothing to worry about: *We're very worried.*

You can hold her in a minute: *We're taking her away from you.*

There is no time or geography here. The air is warm and withering, thick with beeps, hisses and whispers. There's no window in our

cordoned corner. Only the curtains hint at a world outside with air and sky and a cable ferry.

I carried the new doll with me as we walked by the river. The afternoon hummed with heat and insects. When we reached the pub opposite the cable ferry crossing, Dad bought a pint and two small glasses of lemonade. We sat at a picnic table. Emily and I sipped our drinks through bendy straws and watched the ferry creep towards and then away from us across the width of the river.

I asked Dad if we could go on the ferry. In likely anticipation of bath time and the unprecedented sight of his finger-stamps blooming across my backside, he agreed. He gave Emily and me 10p each, enough for a return trip and nodded and waved to the ferryman as we paid our fares.

The ferry had bench seats down the port and starboard sides. There weren't any seats in the middle so that the ferryman could pull the boat along the thick cable that was attached to a post on either side of the river. A rail tracked behind the seats, like the back of a chair, a nod to safety that seemed sufficient back then.

We waved to Dad on the outward trip. He sipped his pint and gave a salute. I lifted the as yet nameless doll from the seat between us and waved her too.

When we reached the far bank, we were stationary for a couple of minutes while the ferryman helped people alight and collected money from new passengers. Emily and I swivelled around on our seats, kneeling on the warm, soft, wood, resting our elbows and chins on the slender metal safety rail.

I have always thought that there are two types of imagination: hopeful and inoculating. Even as a child, I tended to avoid the hopeful kind, so as to evade disappointment. I dodged happy daydreams out of the same superstition that causes people to sidestep ladders. I preferred to use my imagination for prevention rather than cure, a means of injecting myself with enough disappointment and terror to protect against a future epidemic. It seemed that imagining the worst might prevent it from ever happening.

On that August afternoon the river was liquorice soup. As we leaned over the rail, it occurred to me that it would be easy for Emily to slide under it into the darkness. Within seconds it would be unclear where to

dive, where to clutch and snatch. It would be like blind man's bluff. Emily would sink deeper and deeper and deeper, into the black silty bottom of the river, tangling in the tightening reeds as she struggled. A flip of my stomach warned of an imaginative overdose. Too late. Emily's drowning face floated through my thoughts with impunity.

"What will you call the dolly?" she asked as the boat began its return trip.

"Not telling," I managed, blinking the fabrication of her struggling, waterlogged features away.

"She has to have a name."

Emily let go of the rail and reached for the doll on the seat between us.

I grabbed the doll with one hand and seized Emily's arm with the other in an attempt to force her elbow back onto the rail.

Emily wobbled. There was a splash.

"It's very sad."

I don't realise that Emily is talking to me until she says it again.

"It's very sad."

"I know."

"It's the saddest thing I've ever seen."

"Me too," I say, as if I am a casual observer. As if I am watching the news or a documentary about neonatal care.

"Very sad." She looks as if she might cry. If she cries she might leave. She might need to get tissues or a cup of tea from the canteen. And I will be alone.

"Look at the curtains," I say.

"The *curtains*?"

"Look. They're like a map. See the cable ferry?"

She shakes her head at me.

"Remember that summer..." I stop talking as she stands.

"I'm going out for a bit," she says.

"Don't—"

"I need to," she says and swishes the curtains open. "You should be sitting there." She points at the chair then closes the curtains behind her.

The empty chair gapes accusation at me. I sit down. Sitting here like this is beyond my imagination. When we were small and we got tired

and upset Mum used to say, "You're beyond." I'm beyond; pushed further than the limits of my imagination.

I tried to vaccinate myself against something like this. As a teenager I read Dad's embryology text book. It was locked in the glass cabinet in the lounge, next to *The Body Book* with its well thumbed central pages: line drawings of a man and a woman jigsawed together in what seemed, back then at least, like a progression of intricate exercises. The embryology book was Dad's from university. He said it was in the cabinet because it was *upsetting*. I spent many immunising hours examining the magnitude of human deformity: a baby with his insides out, another with a nose in the middle of its forehead, fists without fingers, supplementary limbs, onion eyes, partially formed genitals, polycephaly. I thought it was enough. Prematurity and multiple organ failure weren't in the book.

She's sedated, not in pain they say. I haven't asked if pneumonia is like drowning.

They can't say when, but the swathe of the curtains suggests that there won't be a tomorrow for us, suspended on the third floor of the hospital. I open the porthole in the side of the incubator and fold my fingers around a swollen arm: Jennifer's arm.

I let go of the doll. At that moment it seemed the most heroic of gestures, the doll instead of my sister, a choice that had to be made in an instant. Let the doll drown, let it not be Emily.

Splash. The ferryman slowed his pulling but the momentum of the boat pushed us past my bobbing doll. "On the way back, sweetheart," he said to me. "On the way back, I'll see if I can't just scoop her out." But everyone could see that she was drifting in the lazy current, downriver, towards the weir.

"What was her name?" Emily asked, rubbing her arm where I'd clamped it tight.

I leaned close to her ear and whispered it there.

Dad was waiting on the bank. He looked like he was going to say something, but he stopped as he registered Emily's misery-pinched face. "What a day," he said wearily. "The sooner we get home the better." He set off at marching pace. Every so often he stopped and turned around. "Come on," he called. "Hurry up." He broke into a run as we neared home and saw the ambulance outside the house. My brother had been

born while we were out. *James—Seven pounds, three ounces*, Dad wrote later on a piece of paper that he taped to the front door.

But even the sight of the ambulance couldn't hurry Emily. She dawdled along the road, nursing her upset. And all the way to the front door, her sombre lips mouthed, "Poor, poor Jennifer."