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Amity

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Yes, I knew what was wrong. And I knew what had happened, and I knew my name, and I knew where I was, and I knew who you were, and I knew what you wanted from me, too. I would have said so if I could. Not that I had anything to prove. Not that I wanted anything from you. Just to put you at ease, to let you know I was all right. The words were there, but I couldn't get to them. They were trapped somewhere beyond me, and somehow they formed and floated, but when I tried to catch them with my tongue, they dissolved. I know what that must have looked like: me flopping my mouth open and shut like a landed fish. You would have liked to conk me on the head and be done with it, I knew that too. I could see it in your smirk. You'd have liked to give me a good kick. At least a good rattle—the way you used to shake and shake your dolls. You see, I was still there. No matter what it might have looked like to you.

What had happened to me was only a failure of body; it was not a problem of mind.

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I was sitting in my chair, as always. I had been doing the crossword, as was my habit. Searching for words, even then. Eating mints for breakfast, and maybe that was wrong, but I would have had the protein shake too—later, as instructed. I would have eaten my lunch—cleared my plate. I would have eaten my dinner—same. Waste not, want not—all that never changed. I am a good girl. I do what I'm told. I stick to the schedule. Except: chocolate mint patties in the morning. My secret. And really: who cares?

The first thing: my pencil faltered. Then: my hand froze. The chocolate was melting in my mouth, and I licked it off my teeth, felt the dribble of it down my chin, thought to wipe it with the tissue crumpled in my other hand. Heard the finches at the feeder outside my window. And the sigh of the refrigerator. The knacker of the kitchen clock. The rustle of my fine silk robe.

It was just this: I couldn't move. There was a flutter to the side, where the shadows seemed to shift. Or no, it was more like a light had gone out, down the hall, in the bedroom, in the bathroom. At first, I thought there'd been some sort of catastrophe. The kind you read about in books. A bomb, say. An invasion. Tsunami. Earthquake. Tornado. But the window was bright. The leaves green. Sky blue and not a cloud.

And then it all collapsed. An implosion, like. The world folded in around me. I folded in upon myself.

How long? I don't know. I heard you tell the doctor: *It could have been days.* Before you called. Before you came. Before you found me there.

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Amity. My daughter. St. Anne's Hospital. Seventh Floor. ICU. Mary. A stroke. A blood clot on a mission of erasure from my leg up into my brain.

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They've moved me to a private room, because I have the money to pay to be here on my own, no slab of flesh snoring and rotting and passing gas in the next bed. I know I have Ham to thank for this, as for everything else that's ever in my lifetime been mine. I'm grateful, too, that he's not here to see me now.

The doctor has explained that if I feel emotionally overwhelmed, that's due to the situation in my noggin. He spoke slowly, brought his face close to mine. Whiskers on his chin; onions for lunch.

A stroke is a strangulation of an area of the brain due to a lack of oxygen caused by a blockage, hemorrhage, or embolism. Symptoms and aftereffects of a stroke will vary depending on where the stroke occurs. Movement and sensation for one side of the body is controlled by the opposite side of the brain.

I'm not a foreigner, I wanted to say, and I'm not deaf, I wanted to shout, but I couldn't do either, and that's what's what. My tongue is tied.

He's explained that part to me too, and when you showed up, I had to listen to it all over again. You brought flowers and chocolates, books, a crossword, and Brattles too, because that's not only allowed, it's encouraged. He leaped up onto the bed and licked my face and panted and barked. His small paws tramped all over me. I held him in my one good arm, and you beamed, happy to have provided such a thing, then pulled open the curtains to bring in the sunlight too. Vased the flowers, placed the books, unwrapped the chocolates, turned off the TV.

See, Mom, you said. Just like home.

Amity. Your soft hands and doughy face. Your blunt-cut hair, dry as straw. A cow, I thought, looking at you. And was ashamed.



Now the burden shows itself, because any conversation can only be one-sided. At first I struggled to respond, but I now I've given up and settled back to let you do all the work, for once.

Amity. You were the little girl in the calico dress I made for you myself. Not because I had to, but just because I could. You were the silent one then, as a child, wide-eyed and reserved, never the first to laugh or have anything to say. Instead, you stood back and you faded. Sometimes it was easy to forget you were there. The three of us, you and Ham and me, we were a quiet little family. Over dinner, for example. Eating on the good china at my mother's lovely table. Our small house was just

big enough for us, with a sunny yard and a garden for Ham to tend and an extra room for me and my sewing. I am only remembering the good parts, no doubt. There must have been dark days too, but if there were, I can't recall them anymore.

Now that silence seems an obstacle. You do your best to fill the gap of me with your own voice. Mostly complaints, though you wouldn't like to know that. You're in a pickle yourself, after all, with your own kids gone, the last one off to college, and your own house—much bigger and noisier and messier than mine ever was—looming over you, with all its particular requirements and care. Now you're telling me: Frank has left you too. You dab a tear and cock your head, smiling wistfully, then pull a wad of knitting from your bag. Busy hands, I know.

And so that's how we are, then. Me in my bed, clutching Brattles, who's sound asleep. Your needles flashing. The flowers wafting in the breeze from the overhead fan.

And neither of us with anything more to say.



The next time you come to visit, I am that much better. Sitting in a chair, so improved I've expected you to be shocked by the nice surprise of at least having the worry for me lifted from what you like to call your *full plate*. They've washed my hair and combed it, even clipped a little pin here at the side to pull it back from my face, so I am no longer the witch I've recently been. Though the pin pinches,

I've chosen to consider that a good thing, a feeling I can feel, a reminder to myself that I am here. My hands are folded in my lap, positioned so you wouldn't know one of them is dead weight, entirely useless to me now. My bad leg in a brace. The struggle of dressing minimized by simple clothes, and ample. Plenty of room in these pants, for all of me and then some. Even shoes with Velcro straps—though not very dainty, at least they're new. Bright white. Athletic shoes. As if.

The flowers on the tables and the windowsill pile up. Here is a carafe of fresh water. And books, useless to me now. Magazines, the same. But I refuse the television and sit instead in my own silence, admiring the sparkle of the parking lot below and the blooming trees beyond.

This time you haven't brought the dog along. Your explanation for why not—even the nurses have been looking forward to seeing him—reveals to me the truth. You've got rid of him. My Brattles. When I make a fuss—moaning and gawping and struggling to stand—you admit the truth, then do your best to bury it in another lie.

You've passed him on to a good family. *It's for the best*, you say. *He has a great home now*. You can't be home all the time with him, the way that I've been. He was lonely—which I take to mean he's ruined something, one of your expensive shoes maybe, your furniture, your rug. I close my eyes against the vision of the violence of what I can guess was your response. You would have killed him, I think, and I check your hands for bite

marks, scratches, but am relieved to find no such thing—just your perfect manicure instead.

Still, you overdo it so much, simpering, kneeling by my chair, I am afraid you might be about to put your head in my lap. Asking for forgiveness, telling me how hard this is for you.

You're not the only one who suffers, you say. And the nurse, in the doorway, with a tray, meets my look. Pauses. Then creeps away.



This morning you've come to visit me again, with more flowers and the chocolate mints you know I like. Bossing the nurses around and making things nice in my room. Offering me a pillow you've bought, with some oriental silk design. It's pretty maybe, but not my style, and I wonder what you were thinking. Still, I hold it in my lap and the weight of it feels good. The fabric is pleasant to the touch. I'm fingering it at the corner, taking comfort the way I used to take it from the satin trim of a blanket when I was a child. Or the silky feel of Brattles' ear lately. No more news on that front. I'm left to picture him happily romping in the green grass of someone else's enormous front yard. Yapping after squirrels. Barking at the sky.



You sit across from me. Me in my chair. Feet on the flaps. My leg in its brace and the clumsy shoes on my feet, sized up a notch to accommodate the

swelling. The therapist has me lifting my arms up over my head, but I don't like to do it, and I resist and refuse until, with your negative reinforcement added in, he gives up and lets me be. I'm grateful to you for that. Big bossy girl, you've always been one to have your way.

Other news: you've lost your job. Or maybe you quit. It's not clear and I can't ask and it doesn't matter. I'm going to guess you were fired, because it wouldn't surprise me, and it wouldn't be the first time either. *A shit job anyway*, you say, and you can see me flinch at the word but you don't care. Anything for a reaction. Another quirk: wanting a response, doesn't matter if it's good or bad.

You're telling me you've hired a cleaning service to take care of my apartment. Keep it in order, ready for when they let me go back. You've used your power of attorney to write the cheques to pay the bills, and you've been sorting through things too, while you're at it. I don't want to think about what that means—you with your hands all over everything, judging me.

You're the kind of person who will always turn a conversation, any conversation, doesn't matter what it is—politics, religion, the weather, the price of corn—to yourself, to some anecdote in which you are the star. *Oh, that reminds me*, you say. Or, *It's just like the time I ...* Or, *I did that once myself*. Or, *Well for me it's ...* Turning a conversation into a monologue. A dialogue into a diatribe. I wonder if that's my fault. I am your mother, after all.

Ham and I let you have centre stage too often, maybe. We listened too closely to you, paid too

much attention, let you think it mattered who you were and what you had to say.

Ham always said we should have had another child.

But now that I can't talk, it's all lots easier for you. You don't have to work to turn the conversation around to face and mirror you. You can start right there, gazing at your own reflection, with me right here, a captive audience for it all.

When a person can't talk, people will react in different ways. Some run off as fast as they can. They bring a gift, pay a visit, but I can see they're anxious to get away, and sometimes it can be amusing to try to prolong their discomfort. Keep them captive and watch them squirm.

Others assume if I can't talk, then I must not be able to hear either. They shout at me and mistake my wince for anguish, my scowl for grief.

Then there are the ones who try to do my talking for me. Filling in the empty spaces with what they think I would be saying if I only could. These folks I can listen to forever. I never want this one to leave, and I'm saddened when she does—she must, she has other things to do—because I always feel she's taken some vital bit of me along with her when she goes.

You, however, are different. You just talk and talk, creating a drone of information that fills the room, like the hum of the refrigerator or the whirring of the fan. Pretty soon, I don't even hear it anymore and only miss it when it suddenly stops.



I am beginning to unfold. A door cracks open. A window lifts. The power will come back in an instant, dark to light, but this is different, a slow seepage of forgotten words. Paradigm. Incubate. Callipers. Penchant. Relegate. They have no context; they're just sounds that float up like bubbled captions. I move my jaw, lick my lips, prepare to speak. Soon. I can feel it coming. Anon.



You whirl in with a bag of bagels, coffee, oranges. The unsaid is like a boulder on my chest, making it hard for me to breathe.

Imperturbable.

A fluff of cream cheese adheres to your lip, and I gesture but you don't understand, and so I watch it float there as you rattle on and on, filling up all the empty spaces with the sound of your own voice. As a child, you made noise just to prove that you were there, you were real. Constantly calling out, *Hello!* into the void.

Restitution.

Permeable.

Valence.

The coffee burns and I yelp, which makes you smile.

Fracking.

Querulous.

Eventual.



You've decided not to bother looking for another job. Not right away, anyway. You're old enough to retire; plenty of women stop working at your age. Plenty of women your age have never worked at all. You've also put your house up for sale, at a good price because you want to get it done, get it gone and off your hands, because, you reason, there could be another real estate crash, and even if this isn't the best time to sell, it might also not yet be the worst, and you don't want to take chances. Explaining all of this to me as we sit in my room. With the flowers you've brought—always flowers—so many now a person might think, by the look of them all, that someone's died. The nurses twinkle at me: *Somebody loves you, dear!*

Meanwhile you've moved into my apartment. You've cleaned it up, you say. Taken out the carpet—pee-stained—odorous—*How did you stand the stench?*—and replaced it with wood floors. Upgraded the kitchen. *That old refrigerator! Practically an icebox!* Cleaned the cupboards. *I've sorted things for you, Mother. I've simplified.* Installed rails in the bathroom. Arranged the furniture so there is plenty of space for the wheelchair to move around. You had to get rid of a few things to make that work. Set up a hospital bed in the little room that used to be my office. It will be better for me, you insist. A better view, too, of the lawn and the street below. I'll be able to see what people are doing out there. How life goes on.

You've taken my bedroom for yourself.

You'll take care of me, you say.

The words flood in now:

Preemptive.
Comfort.
Possession.
Caretaker.
Undulate.
Sisyphian.
Objet d'art.
Longevity.
I maintain my silence anyway.



When I get home, I see all that you've done to make this a place for us to live together. For as long as it takes.

It's only temporary, you say.

I know I should be grateful. I should say Thank you, but I don't. Not because I can't. Because I won't.

I bite my tongue and give it to the cat.

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