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Syllabus

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Elsewhere the hospital flooring is nicer, but here it is poured concrete, painted grey, which seems insulting. As though they had the budget to paint, but couldn't be bothered with a colour. Not that it would have felt any different sitting on it. Which is where I am now, while my husband sits in a chair nearer the hospital bed.

I don't belong bedside, so I sit cross-legged on the floor at the end of this ward, an emergency exit next to me. Only a couple of bed-lengths away, I am still on the scene, but not horning in. Which is appropriate, best as I can guess, because I don't know the unconscious man in the last bed in a row. I only know what he is to my husband.

Which means there are only two of us who know this, two of us who are conscious. The man in the bed only told my husband last year, telling in an almost-not-telling way. As though he had already revealed this news before and was only issuing a reminder. Like the kind you receive about a subscription soon to expire.



He might have shared the news on the heels of a diagnosis, although nobody heard about that either, not until he collapsed and was brought to the hospital by ambulance last week. His other kids view my husband as the foster kid from years before, from another marriage, apart from them in some other time.

The younger daughter stands and stretches, offers her seat. The daughters have been there since before the weekend. For how long exactly, I don't know, but long enough to earn that chair remaining empty while she walks the loop around the nurses' desk. "It's more comfortable than it looks," I say, patting my head where it backs against the wall. The older daughter tilts her head in my direction, as if to say that, were her father not dying, she would properly acknowledge the conversation.

It's not comfortable, not truly, but nobody troubles over the lie. There was a time when, even if it was not comfortable, sitting on the floor was not uncommon. In elementary school, kids sat on the floor in the halls, lining both sides to eat lunch. In gym, we began and ended each class seated in squads. From the earliest of ages, I have sat on the floor and observed the adults around me.

Once, sitting on a floor much like this one, practical and bare, I caught a glimpse of something that I couldn't properly name. I had sat in nearly the same place every Monday night for about a year, mostly reading. I wasn't always alone in the library basement: occasionally someone came through one of the stairwell doors—more often the further one, with its passage near the



upper floor's circulation desk—to pluck a book from its shelf.

Once, two men worked on the microfiche machines for the entire evening, at the furthest point from me. They weren't counting on anyone else being there either; they were eating something crunchy, and it was so quiet that I heard them licking their fingers.

After that, I brought my Walkman and my Depeche Mode cassettes, in case more people start hanging out downstairs, in case of more crinkling, more crunching, more licking. But nobody noticed me. Not even in my best outfits, trying to pass as a student, hoping to collapse the years between me and the ages of those in attendance.

Which didn't mean that I wanted to go to teacher's college. At that age, I could fit two things together and test the combination for truth in my own small world alone. It simply meant that I wanted to be old enough to be in that library for some other set of reasons, reasons that had nothing to do with waiting: I wanted to be not waiting.

Not waiting while my mother attended night school, which was still school, but mostly for older people upgrading their skills. Sometimes her teachers allowed me to sit in the classrooms, but mostly I waited. That library at the teacher's college was the best place of all: it not only had books, but children's books. Because she was enrolled there, my mother also could borrow things. While I waited, I looked at books I didn't want to be seen borrowing.

One night, I had piled all the Carolyn Haywoods around me, twelve in total. These were old-fashioned stories written for little girls but they still mattered to me. I pulled all those Betsy books off the shelf and sorted them into stacks: the ones I knew and loved, the ones I knew but didn't love, the ones I didn't know that looked good, and then the rest.

This kind of mess might have gotten me a dirty look or a scolding from a librarian, if anybody was ever downstairs long enough to notice. But nobody was watching me. If, when I was done, I reshelfed all the books in best-to-worst instead of alphabetical order, they would still be that way the next Monday night.

Meanwhile, I sat with Betsy—she in her pig-tails and tam, me in my green stirrup-pants and legwarmers—marvelling that, as a young girl, I had believed everything was fine when she waved to her mother and turned to walk to school alone. Now, I could see the disaster coming, could anticipate her taking that wrong turn. Now, it took only a few minutes for me to read a Betsy chapter, to see my predictions unfold.

That night, I'd been sitting on the floor of the library long enough to feel the concrete's chill, but not long enough to be uncomfortable, when the door near the photocopier sneezed open. Shushing, covered whispers, and kissing—not talking—by the time the couple turned the corner at the end of the first aisle.

When the door burst open, I clutched my book closer, surprised. It was between my belly and my

folded arms, gripped too tightly to turn a page, but that didn't matter: my focus had shifted to the desk butted up against the end of that bay of shelves.

The woman slid sideways onto that desk, facing me, but with the end of the bookcase between us, blocking her view. The man's back was to me and I knew what they *weren't* doing, because his clothes were fastened. She was all dressed too, but she was whispering about it feeling good. Not all the wet sounds were mouth sounds. Their breaths were like hisses in the stillness.

At first I couldn't stop looking and then I wanted to, but there was no way to leave. "Come on, baby, come for me," he said, over and over, and after that there was more noise, and still more, but quiet noise, until—finally—there was less.

If I had been reading, I would have been able to guess how long it lasted by how many pages I had read. But I hadn't even looked in Betsy's direction.

He moved to leave quickly, was already facing the way they had arrived by the time she got off the desk. In the course of her shimmying and straightening, she noticed me through the gaps in the shelves before leaving me in the basement with the heady smell of concrete and dust and all the things that Betsy didn't know.

Now, outwardly I look different. I'm three times older than I was then—closer to four, now that I think about it, because what else have I got to do? I likely folded, rather than sank, onto the floor back then, more like an origami crane than a tire iron. It doesn't feel so different though.

When the nursing staff is preparing for a shift change, they advise the family to do what needs doing elsewhere now, because it is going to be a long night. My husband offers to drive those who were dropped off here earlier, so they can leave and return quickly. The man's wife has a car and agrees to let the dogs out for a piddle. Even while someone is dying, there is talk of piddling.

Only the older daughter remains and, after everyone else has left, she pats the chair alongside her and asks if I will sit. I move to rise. The crack of my knees seems to echo as I stretch and resettle.

Almost immediately, a staff member approaches to ask a question. The man in scrubs knows that she is family, that she is the one to ask; but she is tired, not yet thirty, and unsure of the answer. She stares through the gaps of incomprehension, and I feel the chill of the concrete on the backs of my thighs, that pervasive unreadiness.

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