

Lee Montgomery

WHOSE WORLD IS THIS?

That night, the night before William left me for good, I lay awake and asked myself what would happen if I closed off all my senses except for sight. If I plugged my ears, my nose, cut my tongue, taped my fingers, just shut the door to all my senses, could my eyes possibly compensate for my loss? Could I see more? Could I see myself for who I was? Could I possibly know from here what I might find there? Then?

There is only freedom in not wanting. This is what William had told me. And my problem was wanting. My problem was desire. Hannah, you always want this or that, he said. You have to understand that this is not the true nature of things. This wanting business makes you small. It makes your mind go to places it shouldn't go. Life only opens if you accept. Now.

★

Sometimes during those afternoons, the California sunlight flew through the windows like tiny golden volleyballs and William laughed and chased me all around the house. *There are some things that you just come to know*, he teased. *With patience, baby, there are some things you just come to know* and with *whoosh* and a *bang*, we flew down the hall, me running, William close behind, his wheelchair buzzing like a fly, its wheels squeaking and grinding against the shiny wooden planks. He was fast and the air felt heavy like rain. It occurred to me one afternoon as I fell to the floor, I didn't want to run anymore. I played possum instead. Played dead. Played still. I watched him upside down and holding my breath, he grew crooked and strange like in a dream, the sunlight moving around him, faster than speeding bullets, faster than the speed of sound. The motor stalled, and William flipped his elbow several times to hit the control forward, but it was a random motion, luck of the draw; sometimes he couldn't move at all.

"Transmitting," he said staring at his fingers.

I pushed myself up and slipped my arms around him. “Transmitting,” I repeated, tightening my hold and feeling him then, cold and awkward, I felt sad, and because he was paralyzed, I felt I had the right to this sadness.

★

I met William in the spring of 1976, when I was working the graveyard shift at a nursing home in a town called Locke, a nowhere town east of San Francisco where the Sacramento River wound around levees and dams and the bars that lined main street had flashing neon martini glasses out front. I was twenty-six or seven and doing a lot of drugs, trying to find God, trying to figure out how many men I could make love me at the same time. I think there were four of them before William, all boys I met at a bar named the Bighorn in town, all boys who couldn't get their eyes to meet mine straight on, and this was the first thing I noticed about William: He looked me in the eyes and when he did, the others drifted away; one by one.

Graveyard meant I worked from midnight to seven in shifts of three. Each shift I turned twenty bodies to ensure each body would stay in one place for only so long. It didn't matter, because people's bodies had minds of their own. Deep sores dug into bony hips like small gaping mouths and sometimes late at night when I looked into these mouths, I saw these wounds churn into rosy throats and at the bottom where I imagined voices would call, a wall of bone, white and stony glaring out at me. Tending to these people was always harder, taking more time to roll bodies and change bandages, taking more drugs to get through. I was working that shift the night I first met William. I had just finished my first round when I walked into the empty room at the end of the hall. The room had been empty for months and I went in there sometimes to turn my back on the night, to summon peace, but invariably as I lay there, I replayed my nights over in my head. *Mrs. Harper wasn't eating. May had seemed angrier than usual. Mr. Schultz was on his way out.* And I would always be left with imagining that moment when I watched the light leave these people's eyes. In an instant, whatever was there would be gone and I found myself afraid I would die, too. I had dreams of talking to dead men in caskets, dreams

where I saw phantoms wearing purple knee bands jumping out at me to slit my throat, but that night when I first opened the door to this room, I forgot all this because there was this handsome man, my age, maybe a little older, lying flat, not out of choice but out of necessity.

“Oh my God.” I jumped back. “You scared me.”

“Am I that frightening?” he asked.

“No, you just—” I said. “I didn’t know you were here.”

Each room had small fluorescent tubes of light sandwiched into the seams where the ceiling met the walls. It was a strange otherworldly kind of light, dim and shadowy. I stood in the doorway a moment and within a second I heard the motor of the bed and his head and upper body rose as the back of the bed moved him forward almost to a sitting position. He had the switch in his mouth, operating the button with his tongue. He spit out the switch and watched it drop as if checking its progress, and then looked up at me and smiled.

“I thought everybody had gone home,” he said, “and I was bumming because I am really hungry.”

“No, there’s a graveyard shift.”

“I knew that,” he said. “But it has been hours since I have seen a soul. Is there anything to eat?”

“No,” I said. “Not really. There’s a machine with peanuts.”

“Would you do me a favor then? There’s money in the drawer. Could you, I mean *would you* get me a doughnut, a real honey-dipped doughnut, make that two at Mister Donut, and a raspberry jelly, with regular coffee, a large, extra cream, and double sugar. I can’t stand the shit they serve here, and I’m starving to death.”

His hair was long, I could tell that, and his eyes were light, a mix of blue and green. He wore a turquoise T-shirt which seemed normal enough, but his body—his arms, his legs, his feet—lay still in separate ways as if they were strangers headed down different roads and I thought, *This is a crime. This is a fucking crime.*

He placed his head back and closed his eyes, as if he were exhausted by the speed, or the lightheartedness of his words. I couldn’t tell which. I was too stunned. I had never imagined a paralyzed man could be so handsome or sound so happy.

I walked into the room and leaned on the steel rails at the end of the bed.

"I'm Hannah," I said.

After a moment, he opened his eyes and I watched the ocean color fade and drift around his face like smoke.

"William," he smiled.

"When did you get here?" I asked.

"Yesterday I think."

"But why here?"

"In between, I guess. I've just spent about six months in the hospital." He looked around the room. "And now . . . well, I guess this is where they put people like me. Apparently."

"Oh," I said pulling my hair away from my face.

"I'm trying to get back to school," he said.

I walked around the bed, checked the catheter bag, and then stood there looking at him, not knowing what to say.

"It's late," I said. "It's like two."

"I know."

"Do you need something to sleep? I can call the nurse to get you—"

"No."

"Do you need anything?" I asked. "Do you need to be moved? Do you need a drink?"

He looked around the room and back at me confused by my concern.

"I think everything is in order, but as I said, doughnuts would be cool."

"Okay, I'll get your doughnuts," I said. "But you'll have to wait until I'm on break."

"How long is that? I am starving."

I looked around. I didn't have a watch. "Soon, man. I'll do it as soon as I can."

★

Four girls were all we had on the graveyard shift. Some of us worked swing. I preferred graveyard. The patients were asleep and taking care of them was easier in darkness. The urine smell was down at night. The old people didn't pee as much or maybe it had something to do with how the sunlight affected things. In any respect, everything seemed

happier, more manageable at night. We had breaks, fifteen minutes or so at a time, and then in the funny yellow light of the coffee room, we'd snort drugs, smoke cigarettes, talk about our boyfriends, and all the old people in the home. We had grown fond of the old people over time. It was hard to see them live and die in these sterile rooms with nobody there. All that and the fact the place smelled of urine, but this was the odd thing. The smell kind of grew on you, became part of you. This is what the girls said on their breaks in the hot lights of the coffee room. *This kind of thing becomes part of you.* But we usually had only fifteen minutes to talk about it and then, we got up, high as hell, to go roll the people. The beds were set up so one could roll the person and the sheets at the same time. It was a trick with the sheets. That's what I remember. Tricks with sheets, long halls of darkness, and all the doors. At three in the morning, it was an endless hell of doors and drugs and rolling souls like piles of manure.

I had no business being there. I had no business being anywhere because I was a drug addict. Black beauties mostly, when I could get them and if not coke and white cross, little white pills with plus signs, which I liked to swallow three at a time. If I couldn't get those, anything at all.

There weren't very many nurses on at night. Josy was one, an LVN and drug dealer, mostly coke, some speed. She worked the same shifts I did, so throughout that winter and spring at the nursing home we managed to have some fun. The problem with Josy was she cut her fast drugs, but I could forgive her for that. She needed the money. She had a three-year-old daughter at home and a boyfriend named Cam who came in and out of her life, making her crazy.

Most nights after I checked in on my wing and Josy had done her meds, we'd meet up, have coffee, snort drugs, and talk about Cam. He was a mean man, tall and big-boned who beat the hell out of her whenever he felt like it, but each night when she'd go on about him, *how sweet he was, what a doll he was*, all I could think about were the bruises and black eyes and I felt rage swallow me. I wanted to stand up and scream, *what the hell gives him the right, the motherfucker.* But I couldn't stand, because I was too high and too ashamed, seeing myself and my skinny girlfriend, drugged and dead, dressed in white polyester and tennis shoes, walking dark halls with our blood-shot eyes and

stringy long hair sucked moist in clumps, caught between our teeth from all the chewing.

★

Spring nights in Locke were cool and calm and I felt hopeful sometimes when I visited an old woman named May. She was about ninety, a retired telephone operator from Sacramento who reminded me of my own grandmother, her old blue eyes and thinly skinned hands holding mine. May always asked the same question over and over. *Dear, how are things? How are things in your world?* We often went outside together to watch the night sky. May was an expert in stars and flowers so she liked to talk on about both. When she felt strong, she walked with her walker, surveying the gardens in the courtyard. *Look how sad the coleus is, Hannah. Doesn't anybody water?*

Sometimes she'd sing to the plants or tell a story, stopping and teetering a bit and then reaching for my hand. *Oh Hannah, your hands are so tiny! My mother had tiny hands, too.*

When she was tired, I'd take her out in her wheelchair and stand behind her. I loved to watch her, because when she moved her face towards the sky, her white hair drooped behind her neck like clouds and she'd talk nonstop about nothing at all. *I don't know how it is in your world, but in my world . . . Ring a ling. Burt is that you? Don't talk to me about heaven. What the hell do you know about heaven?*

After I left William, I checked in on May and from the doorway leading to her room, I could see the white cloth ties around her waist and hands, and I knew she had lost it again. She did that. Every so often, she would explode in frustration, screaming and pounding the nurses and aides, but the next day she would be quiet and smiling as if nothing happened at all. I watched her sleep for a moment and then quietly walked into the room, bending down in front of her and placing a hand on her shoulder. "May," I said quietly. "May, it's Hannah." She didn't move so I reached around the back of the chair to untie the restraints. "May," I said again, placing my hand on her forehead and within a second her eyes snapped open and she started to scream, flailing her arms to push me away, hitting me so hard in the face, my nose started bleeding. I must have yelled because Josy came running in

finding me holding my nose with one hand while trying to hold May down with the other.

“Your nose. You ass,” she said as she took over May. “Your nose is bleeding again.”

“I know,” I said.

“Well, hold your head back.”

I stood there while Josy retied the restraints. May was screaming, “Don’t touch me,” and I started crying because I felt so bad for May and because I couldn’t feel my nose anymore. It didn’t feel like a nose. It felt separate.

“You can’t be doing that for her anymore,” Josy said as she led me into the bathroom. “She’s out of her mind.”

Josy turned back and took my hand. “Now let’s get a look at you.”

She led me to the sinks and gently took my hand away from my nose and the blood came gushing out. “You better lie down.”

There was blood all over my white uniform and I was still crying.

“Josy, I think I have a hole in it.”

The blood kept pouring out and she stuck her slim fingers up my bloody nose and felt around.

“I can’t feel my nose, and then I can, and when I do, man, it hurts.”

“Yeah, girl. You got a hole in it, you better use the other side.”

She looked at me with her translucent green eyes and I began to laugh, sending blood around the room in sprays.

“Shhh,” she said. “Shut-up, you fool. You’re getting blood everywhere.”

But I couldn’t stop. It was that weird release, a sobbing disguised as laughter.

“Oh man, you are really fucked-up. You’re not snorting that speed, too.” And as if she answered the question herself, she reached into her pocket and held up a yellow downer of some kind.

“Eat this.” She put it in my mouth.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Chew,” she said. “One-two-three, chew.”

She moved towards the back of the bathroom, got out her keys, and opened the closet.

“I think there’s a uniform in here that might fit you,” she said. “You’re all bloody.”

I tipped my head forward and saw my chest covered in blood.

“I’m hemorrhaging, Josy. I could be dying right now.”

I lay back down and began crying again.

“What?” she asked, her voice muffled from inside the closet.

“All of it,” I said. “May, you, me. All the blood here.”

Josy walked back holding out a uniform.

“Girl, you need to get your *stuff* together. Big time together. You are falling apart. Doing too much of that bad stuff. Get up.” She pushed me with her foot. “Slow, now, and hold it tight.”

I sat up and the blood started again.

“Shit,” she said. “Get down. Stop crying. It’s not helping anything.”

I lay down and felt the cool tiles on my back. I heard the water running and felt Josy place some cold paper towels on my nose. I looked at Josy then. She was my friend. Her skin was the color of nutmeg, but she had these green eyes—the most amazing color I had ever seen.

“Josy, hasn’t anyone ever told that you have the most a m a z i n g—”

And then the intercom sounded asking for a nurse in Room 40-A.

“It’s May,” Josy said. “Hold on to these. It will stop.”

I lay there a long time before the bleeding finally stopped, and as I did, I felt absolutely drenched in sadness. I wanted to run to Josy and tell her about May. *She’s not crazy, she’s just old* but I couldn’t move. I touched my legs and then moved my hands up my stomach, running them over my breasts and around my face, and when I felt my heart still doing somersaults, I pretended I couldn’t feel it. I pretended I couldn’t move. I played possum. Played dead and I smiled a little about that because it made me think of the stories I had heard about possums. I lay there a little while longer thinking about how terrific it would feel to be a possum with their weird little eyes and little pink skins.

★

Later that night, when the downer had kicked in, and I was able to scrape myself up off the floor and into another uniform, I went around the corner to get William doughnuts. There was no way I could drive and it wasn’t like it was very far. A few blocks, maybe, I don’t know,

it seemed like forever. Time stopped, which was good, because when I got to William's room, my heart felt warm and calm, pleasant and numb over the grinding mess of cocaine.

He was asleep, so I sat in the dark for awhile and watched him. I was only there for a few minutes before I grew to wonder what it felt like, or rather, what it didn't feel like, when one could not roll over in one's sleep. He looked uncomfortable, so I got up and tried to move his legs.

"I'm not asleep," he said. "Can't you see my eyes are open?"

"No."

"I've been watching you. What are you doing?"

"You looked uncomfortable. I was trying to . . . well, I got your doughnuts."

I stood there for a moment when it occurred to me I had to feed him, and it felt strange. I had done many things with men. I had done them with skill and ingenuity. I had done them with my hands, my mouth, and my tongue, but I had never fed a man, young like William. I didn't know where to begin. I put my hands on my hips and watched him, praying he wouldn't see that I was frozen in place, when I noticed his fingers were moving, not shaking, but actually moving with purpose like he was playing an imaginary musical instrument. Finally, I turned on the bedside light.

"Your fingers are moving," I said.

"I know. They do that."

"How come? If the nerves are severed, how can your fingers move?"

"Not severed, just damaged. Anyway, you know the thing about fingers, they have minds of their own."

"Right," I huffed in disbelief. "I'll remember that. Do you want your doughnuts?"

"Yes, but I can't eat lying down. The switch fell."

I hunted around for it, reaching over him, following the cord's trail from his shoulder. When I pressed the switch, he came up slumping to the side. I placed my hands on his shoulders and pulled him straight. He felt light, a bag of crooked bones.

"What do you want first?" I asked sitting on the side of the bed. "Doughnut or coffee."

"Coffee. Then I want the honey doughnut dipped in the coffee."

I put the cup up to his mouth and he sipped. I tore off a piece of the doughnut and soaked it in the coffee and then placed the dripping dough into his open mouth. He chewed, smiling, making noises of pleasure. This is how we spent the next fifteen minutes or so, talking little.

When he had eaten everything, I finally asked about what had happened, how did he become paralyzed. He didn't seem at all shocked at the question.

“A car accident.”

I must have grimaced, because he looked like he wanted to reach out and touch me.

“I didn't feel a thing, but in that split second when the car began to spin, I knew everything there was to know.”

He smiled and it was then I noticed the absence of something. It took only a moment to realize what was missing. It was the simple gesture of a shrug. That's what should have happened. He should have shrugged, but he didn't. He just looked at me wearing this shit-eating grin.

★

Pine Manor had about forty rooms, ten per wing and together all four wings A, B, C, D, came around into a perfect square. William lived in the last room on D, so for the next few weeks I made sure I was assigned to the D wing. I was curious about him. I had never known anyone who was paralyzed. I had seen them, I had felt sorry for them, but I had never known them. So almost every night, I went to William's room and sat at the end of his bed in the dark. Sometimes I watched him sleep. Other times, when he was awake, we'd talk. He was a funny man, half-prophet, half-crazy person, who told me he could read minds, past, and future. I never believed him, of course, but I liked him immediately. Unlike others I knew, he seemed to prefer talking about life in very abstract ways. One of his favorite things was to talk about people as if they were fruit or vegetables. He thought of himself as a root vegetable, like a yam or a rutabaga. Josy was an asparagus; May a tomato, but he told me I couldn't be a vegetable.

“You have a fruit aura,” he said. “An exotic fruit like a pomegranate or a pineapple, something you need to crack open to find the goodies.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Not that you’re not beautiful, you are,” he said. “But your real beauty is hiding.”

“Behind what?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You’re a speed freak,” he said. “I can tell a mile away.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know a drug freak when I see one.”

“What does that say about you?” I asked.

“I know the road, I guess,” he smiled. “It tells you I know the road.” He hesitated a moment and looked the other way.

“Maybe we should get the old lady and go for a stroll.”

William was another night traveler, so he liked to come with me when I took May out. Once I managed to get him into his chair, he followed me down the halls, into May’s room, and then outside. Nothing important happened in the courtyard. In fact, we talked very little; most nights just watching the sky. William and May lined up in their wheelchairs with me on the cement bench behind them. May sometimes would go on about something, about the sky, about the world, and when she talked, we half listened. Otherwise we just sat, William studying the sky as if it had answers, and me studying William in the same way.

★

William’s room got morning sun and it wasn’t long before I made it a habit to say good-bye before I went home. I opened the curtains, washed his face with a warm washcloth. He often moaned and asked me to hold his hands and then asked me to rub him with lotion; maybe coconut or cocoa butter or something else he could smell. He didn’t say so, but I thought he was trying to feel again.

When I rubbed him, his back, and his chest, he sometimes told me I was beautiful.

“Perfect beauty,” he said. “I like that.”

William sang in his sleep. He sang songs from *Hello Dolly*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Music Man*, *Oklahoma* and at night sometimes, I sat outside his room and listened. One night he sang almost all the songs of *Hair*.

“Was that you last night?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly from the bed.

“Last night singing. I thought I heard you singing *Hair*.”

I walked across the room and opened the blinds. The windows overlooked the courtyard. It was early.

“Hell no. Don’t know any songs from *Hair*, don’t know how to sing either.”

He was smiling.

“What kind of person is that, a person who can’t sing?” I asked.

“The same kind of person who can’t walk I suppose.”

“Maybe you sing in your sleep?”

“Nah. I’m a sleepwalker.”

“Unlikely,” I said.

“Unlikely, but not impossible.”

“Sure,” I said. “Can you whistle?”

“Nah.”

“Give it a try. Whistle.”

He puckered his lips and whistled the first refrain of *Everything’s Up to Date in Kansas City*.

“Ah, good lord, *you*.”

“*You*,” he repeated. “Great song. They’ve gone about as far as they can go.”

I stood at the end of his bed.

“I have a helluva sense of humor,” he said.

“Noticed that,” I said.

“On your way home?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Still doing speed?”

“No,” I lied.

“If I could look what would I find in your pocket?”

“What do you know. You don’t know anything.”

“Four reds. Two blues. Fifteen plus.”

I turned my pockets inside out to show him they were empty. The truth was I stashed my drugs in my bra and anyway, Josy was out of fast drugs, and I was doing downers I stole from her drug cart: Haldol, Valium, Miltown, and Demoral. The high was good doing those things. I grew to like the feeling of going down.

“Will you?” He made a quick motion with his head.

“But we’ve tried it,” I said.

“More,” he said. “Please.”

I walked over to him, releasing the bed rail, and pulling back the sheets. He was beautiful even if he couldn’t move.

“Almond or peppermint?” I asked.

“Cocoa,” he said.

I reached into the bedside table’s cabinet and pulled out a bottle of cocoa butter lotion. I poured it into my hands, rubbing them together to make them warm and placed my hands on his chest silent. I began to move them around up to his shoulders and down onto his stomach rubbing. He felt cold.

“Lower,” he said.

“William.”

“Give a dead man a hand job,” he said closing his eyes. “Say yes.”

“X marks the spot,” I said as I marked a big X on his chest. “Do you remember that game? With a dot, dot, dot and a dash, dash, dash and a big question mark.”

I moved my hands willy-nilly up and down his body.

“Shivers going up. Shivers going down. Shivers going all around? Do you feel this?” I asked.

He nodded. I placed my hand on top of his head and hit it, making a soft cracking sound.

“A crack of an egg,” I said and stopped. “I forgot the rest.”

I tried it again. “A crack of an egg . . .” I pulled my hands away. “I’m tired,” I said. “I’ve been here all night.”

I smiled at him. I liked these feelings of exhaustion as if the drugs pushed it further. I felt pleasantly numb most of the time.

“My face? You won’t do my face?”

I poured more lotion on my hands and gently rubbed his face, up around his forehead, his eyes, his nose, his neck, around the back to his ears, his mouth. He pushed out his tongue and licked my hand.

“As long as I have a face, babe . . .”

I took my hands away and glared at him. He laughed.

“Could be good,” he smiled lifting his eyebrows.

“You make it impossible to be nice to you.”

“Come on, it’s easy to be nice to a cripple,” he said. “Isn’t that the thing with the uniform?” He stopped. “It was a miracle,” he said with a sudden serious tone. “When all of a sudden he could feel her touch.”

“Fuck you,” I said.

“Never,” he laughed. I reached down and kissed him hard on the mouth, and he slipped me the most incredible tongue.

“Fuck you,” I said again.

“You’d die trying,” he said. “You’d die.”

★

I lived up river from the home, across a steel drawbridge in a small blue cabin with a fig tree out my window in an old motel motor court with other blue cabins with white shutters. In those days, the place, maybe ten cabins in all, was run by a woman named Lydia. She was about sixty with dyed black hair and she had a body shaped like a potato with legs. When I told William this, he laughed.

I liked Lydia, I told him. She had spirit. She drank her vodka from the bottle straight up, and yelled things like “Let them, let them eat figs for Christ’s sakes!” at the top of her lungs, any time of the day, for no reason at all. She reminded me of my mother in her inappropriateness, in her crassness, and I will always remember her because of that, and the figs, and because she had a boyfriend named Richard who she called Dick. When I met up with them taking out the trash or hanging around the pool, she always said, “Have you met my Dick? My Dick,” and she laughed, her body shaking, her plastic yellowed teeth shining in the air.

“William, you know the first time I met Lydia she looked at me and said this, ‘Jesus, sister, you have a set of the biggest tits I have ever seen. Heavens mercy almighty. Dick, take a look. It’s fucking tragic.’”

“You hardly ever meet women like that anymore,” I said. “Women who say things like that. Women who tell it like it is.”

“Let me see them,” he said.

I looked at him a moment in disbelief.

“Let me see them. They don’t look so tragic to me.”

And as I pulled up my shirt for him to see, he told me they were grand, but every part of me was grand, and Lydia was just mean. I was perplexed because I had thought many things about Lydia but I never thought she was mean and then he asked me to kiss him and when I did, I remembered the feeling I knew when in love and doing drugs. It was a matter of shifting, like flying perhaps, but more like a twisting into a new world, a world within reason, a world of hope and faith with Gods and things. It was as simple as that. The colored pills and powders were just symbols, popping and snorting rituals. Red for promise. Black for desire. White for love and like that. But that summer, after I met William, things began to change. It wasn’t coherent or deliberate, it just happened like a spell of bad weather happens, and a part of me knew, like addicts know, I was going down. The question was how far could I go and how long would it take to get there.

William told me to think of it like this. Imagine you’re on a train. You know where you’re headed. You can get off, or follow it to the end.

By then we had learned to make love, but it was a random love, like William’s moves, luck of the draw. On the days he came home with me, I would strip him of all his clothes and me of mine and we’d lay in bed facing each other in darkness, William propped on his side with a bank of pillows and he would tell me how it would feel if it could happen. Each moment. Blow by blow. And when he went on like this so assured, it was stunning how he could ease me into feeling with his words. And there were times when I could get high enough, I would make grand stands, carefully unhooking his catheter and taking his penis in my mouth, saying let’s give it a whirl, and when it didn’t work, I cried and told him I loved him and he said, it was not love that I was feeling. It was pity. “All the sadness you feel for me is really your own.”

★

In late June William came to stay with me before heading off to school. Lydia and Dick set up the cabin so he could get around. There were

only three rooms, but they were large and I didn't have very much furniture, so he could wheel around from room to room. While I was at work, Lydia and Dick spent time with him or when they weren't with him, he read Gurdjieff, and other mystics, Sufis, and Zen, turning the pages of his worn books with his teeth on this special contraption designed for quadriplegics. I fed him, I bathed him, I became expert at moving his body around from chair to couch to bed to chair to couch to bed, always pleasantly numb and buzzing from the pain killers and Seconals I stole from the nursing home and the speed that I could occasionally get from Josy.

In the mornings when I came home I watched him sleep before I woke him and fed him breakfast. I sat in a chair next to my bed, sentimental and sad from the drugs the night before, always wishing when he woke up he could reach out to hold me.

"Hannah, I am okay like this," he said one morning. "Really. Come here."

I climbed into bed and as I lay with him, careful to keep my eyes open, I listened to the sounds of his breathing, and thought about the songs he hummed in his sleep, and all that he had told me. Love is an act of faith, he had said, and during those days, I groped for this kind of understanding in darkness. I dreamt of knowing this deeply as I dreamt of knowing the things he knew, as if he had answers I could know by keeping my eyes wide open while wrapping my body around his deadened one in sleep.

If I was able to find the right combination of drugs, I could sleep, but I never looked forward to this, because my dreams were always the same. I was blind and cold lying somewhere always feeling little fingers struggling to open my eyes. William said it wasn't forever. Whatever it was, it wasn't forever. And he stayed beside me during these times and watched me sweat and shake with odd fevers and strange night-like visitors poking at my eyes.

★

By August I had found another job in Sacramento, so I was working at the nursing home only a few nights a week. I would still visit May whenever I could, but during the days, I worked counseling fat people

on how not to be fat. The place was called The Stress and Habit Control Center, and was run by a reformed Scientologist who had become a sociologist and hypnotist, a guy named Dr. Roger Bayne, who paid me two hundred dollars a week, plus a bag of dope, Humboldt dope, no big thing. He hypnotized me a few times so I would know what it was about. The last time, he sat me down in a small white room in a brown vinyl reclining chair, asked me to close my eyes, and then talked me down a long set of stone steps in my head. At the bottom was a river and a boat waiting for me. I got in the boat and he guided me down this river to a dock, where he asked me to get out and then look at my feet.

“What do you see?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“What are you wearing on your feet?”

“I have no feet.”

“You must have feet. Everyone has feet. Feel your legs.”

“I have no legs.”

“Look up,” he said. “What do you see?”

“I see an old woman’s head doing somersaults.”

“Ask her a question.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“What does she say?” he asked.

“Who wants to know? Her face is bleeding and she’s asking who wants to know?”

When I opened my eyes, Dr. Bayne wore an expression that seemed to say, *I am worried about you*, but he kept me on anyway, paying me to dress up like I knew something about people and sit in a room full of mirrors and make these people who wanted to be thin eat their favorite foods. The people, some weren’t so fat, walked in carrying bags of potato chips and Cheetos and Big Macs and things and there we sat while they chewed it all up and spit it out into a pink napkin so I could tell them stories about where the food went and how it really did not have their best interests at heart.

“This food here hates you,” I said. “It really does. It’s trying to trip you up.” And I held up a big jar full of fat in formaldehyde for them to see—it took two hands to hold—and their reaction, no matter who they were, was always the same. Their mouths would drop as their

eyes dulled a notch with a distancing waver. *I am shutting off now*, they signaled: *I am shutting o-f-f*.

It was another irony, another lie I lived. I had no business being there telling these people these things, and one afternoon I met a woman who told me just that. She had brought a perfectly beautiful apricot pie that she had made from scratch. I looked at her, the delicious folds in her old skin, her bright brown eyes, and thought, *Hannah, you will never be a woman like this*.

She told me she had picked the apricots from a tree in her yard and she loved these apricots so dearly she waited every year for them to come ripe, and every year, she gained five lousy pounds, and over the years that added up. *But you're beautiful*, I wanted to say. *But this pie is beautiful*.

I looked at her hands and thought these are the hands of a woman who loved apricots. The skin was luminous, nurtured, and thin. I could see her purple veins, and the peach color on her nails moved in waves as her fingers kneaded the straps of her black leather bag. I looked at my own hands, empty and sad, and felt frightened because I didn't know what I loved anymore.

"These apricots here hate you," I said. Her face snapped in stillness, her smile and eyes flickered gently as if she was saying, *Please be kind to me, I am only trying to understand this love of apricots*.

"They hate you," I repeated. She winced in disbelief and I found myself trying to imagine what it felt like to be a woman happy picking something as stupid as apricots and placing them lovingly one by one in a basket. I began to cry. William was leaving the following morning and I realized I had gone as low as I could go with this woman. Even so, she leaned over and took my hand and squeezed it. "This must be very hard on you," she said. "This must be very hard."

When I got home that evening, I found William packed and ready to go, and celebrating with Dick and Lydia by the pool.

"Hannah," Lydia howled when she heard my car door slam. I walked towards them across the front lawn. They huddled together around a table under a dirty gray umbrella. Lydia was drunk, I could see that from the dreamy expression that comes from too much alcohol, and for the first time, it made me feel afraid.

“Hey baby,” William said. He dropped his head down and sipped something from a long red-and-white striped straw that poked out of his glass. Directly behind them was a cliff that led up to a mesa. The sky hung over it with streaks of red, and I thought briefly again about that woman and her apricots. She had been so kind.

I sat down next to them.

William looked at me, rolling his eyes. “I lost my socks,” he said.

“He moved his foot,” Lydia said. “Getting ready for his trip.”

Dick pushed a basket full of chips at me.

“Eat something, darlin’,” he said. “You look like you need to something to eat.”

He smiled and his aftershave drifted at me in waves. I turned away and looked at William.

“You shouldn’t be drinking,” I said. “You know how sick it makes you.”

“Look who’s talking,” Lydia chortled. “Our resident druggie.”

Dick turned to her. “Lydia, you’re being belligerent to our friend here. Our little Hannah who looks so sad today.”

“What’s new?” she snorted. “Ms. Pathetic.”

She got up and teetered towards her cabin to get herself another drink.

“I just don’t want to be the one who has to dig the shit out of you,” I said to William. “I’m tired of digging shit out of you.”

“Nobody has asked you to dig the shit out of me,” he said. “It’s been your choice all along.”

In the middle of the bathroom, in the middle of the floor, under the fifth plank, is a silver box of my mother’s where I hid my drugs, and when I found myself there after I had put William to bed, I saw that they were gone.

“Tell me where you put my drugs,” I asked him. “Tell me.”

I rolled him over to face me and stood there as long as I could, before finally leaving the room, walking around the house, turning on all the lights and pulling open all his boxes, suitcases, drawers, the closets, more drawers, hunting frantically in pockets, in corners, under rugs, searching for help and hope in small packages that I could swallow.

“William,” I screamed. “Tell me where they are.”

He opened his eyes, but said nothing.

“Tell me,” I said.

He turned away. “No.”

I don’t remember all the details of pulling him from the bed, and dragging him into the living room, but I do remember begging, and I do remember seeing him alone on the floor, struggling, his eyes stunned and blinking as his mouth kept saying “No.”

“Move,” I said. “If you can hide drugs, you can move. I want you to move, damn it.”

He only looked at me and blinked. As I watched him, I listened to the knocks and whirls of the night, and when everything grew still, I closed my eyes and saw myself in him, in different pieces thrown all over the floor. *If a woman has no strength or courage*, I asked myself, *what then?*

I walked in circles and thought about how odd it felt to be so out of control. To actually feel so terrified and so enraged.

Then I saw him move. I saw the son of a bitch move.

“Hannah,” he said, his legs moving phantom moves as if he was running in place.

“Hannah,” he repeated like he was asking a question, and I couldn’t see him anymore.

I left him there and walked outside. I walked around the house holding my eyes open with my fingers and looked inside through all the windows. This was a great comfort to me, looking inside on a life as if it belonged to somebody else, and through these windows, I watched William on the floor, his legs were still, his body lay in a chaotic lump. I watched him from all different windows, and thought about how much I hated myself for doing this to him, how much I hated myself, indeed.

“Hannah,” he called. I couldn’t hear him, but I saw his mouth move. I knocked on the window. He turned towards me. “Come back,” he said.

I stretched the palms of my hands and pushed my lips and nose against the cool glass. I wanted to scream “help me” but all I could say was “I can’t.”

I turned away and began to walk, up around the back of the house, on a trail that led to the mesa. I walked for hours and later, when I got home and found William asleep on the floor, I straightened his legs and his arms, and covered him with a blanket. After a moment of watching him, I climbed on top of him, touching his nose, his lips, and the tops of his eyes with my fingers.

“Will you please stay with me a little longer?” I asked.

He laughed. “Why in the world would I stay with someone who would throw me out of bed for drugs. Really Hannah, you’re too tortured for words.”

“I’ll die if you go.”

“No you won’t. You’re too stubborn.”

“Please?”

“It’s time for me to go.”

I got up again and turned off all the lights and lay down next to him. It was dark so it took a minute for my eyes to adjust, but soon the smooth buttery light from the moon and the stars illuminated his still figure, sleeping on his back, his hands on his stomach and below that the bump of his penis and catheter. I shimmied myself down his body so I could easily see both him and the sky through the window and lay like that for a long while, listening to the soft sounds of his breath move in and out, occasionally catching in a sigh, and tiny swallowing sounds. When his breath stopped, I held mine and counted. *One, two, three.* A moment passed and I began to trace rivers on his legs and paint imaginary pictures of mountains and moons and hearts and little boxes, but soon shifted again, moving my head down to his toes, spending the night circling around him like a planet.

It had only been a day, but I realized then it had been the first day I hadn’t done drugs for maybe ten years.

William left late the next afternoon. When the van pulled up and the little Mexican man wearing a Dodgers cap came to the door, I locked myself in the bathroom, refusing to help, refusing to say good-bye, but I watched him leave through the window, and felt frightened as I saw him swallowed by the van’s lift, the door shutting tight with a sucking sound. As they drove away, they became smaller and smaller, and I found myself wishing for a wave from the back window, but

remembered there would never be anything like that, and how with William, I only noticed the absence of such things.

★

When William left, life grew unbearably slow. During the days, when I was home I lay on the floor, sensing time shift to hours, hours to minutes, then stopping to rest in tiny pulses as if it was running in place. My first project was devising grand, dramatic schemes of suicide in my head: death by drowning, death by bleeding, death by gas, placing the options in columns, listing advantages and disadvantages. I chose slitting my wrists as the best way to die, the most dramatic, and when I imagined myself dead in a bath of blood, I thought about how sad that would be, and when I felt that sadness in earnest, I began noticing things. Dust balls, and spiders, the color of green on the wings of an everyday housefly and when they became dull, I studied the cracks of my ceiling, memorizing each one by heart, and though I was hoping to find pictures up there, I could find no interesting patterns. When I grew tired of that, I studied the sun, watching light fly through the windows and over long stretches of time like this, my schemes of suicide soon opened to grand theories about what traveled in the rays of the sun.

By then I knew, my life had become a game, a test of light and dark, of life and death, all those doors I traveled through late at night, the clicking and clacking of tiny metal tongues slipping in and out of their frames, locking and unlocking, opening and closing. And now when I see that person in dreams, her face, small and ghostly, floating around my mind as I walk up and down the same hallway in and out of rooms and inside each room people like William. May. Josy. Lydia. A woman with an apricot pie. It was here that I first learned about love and the difference between life and death; what is real and what is not.

“Rain is real,” Josy had told me over a year ago. We were outside hiding in the shadows under a roof overhang. I looked beyond Josy and in the light, saw the translucent sheen of rain. “It’s real ’cause you can feel it on your skin.”

“This bottle is real.” Josy tapped a small vial of cocaine with her fingernail and pushed it up to her nose and snorted. I could hear the tiny tinkling and the quick sucking sounds but couldn’t see her face in the dark.

“The drug is real,” she laughed. “But Hannah, hon, what it does to you makes you unreal, out of this world, not to be believed.”

She shoved the bottle under my nose. “Shoot,” she said. I snorted and within an instant felt the familiar burning and clearing of my mind. *Clean as a whistle*, I thought as I felt interesting thoughts pile up for processing. *Things are real, but thinking is not. There is no such thing as heaven or hell. Rivers are real but love is not. Drugs are real, but I am not.*

★

It is autumn now and with this, the nights have grown long and cool, and when I lie here at night sometimes, I listen to the coyotes play tricks with their voices. I can never tell where they are exactly, and it makes me sad, the nature of things, how animals play tricks to kill, pushing their voices off of canyon walls to confuse their prey. No matter how much time goes by, when I hear their calls, I feel fear, and when I feel fear, my heart does somersaults in my chest, and I think back to the days of drugs, the days of William beside me, knowing he could never feel that knock and whirl of the heart.

I know I am strange. I think very strange things all day long. When I stare out my windows sometimes, I see heaven and from there, I see the world wrapped in a tiny ball in the corner room of a blue cabin with white shutters, and from there I see rich, luscious valleys where rivers wind around the earth like candy ribbons, their banks crumbling and sweet as chocolate layer cake. From there, I see everything there is to know.

In our strange months together, whenever I slept I dreamt I was blind, but now as I live and dream, I see all the time and if I fall into darkness, William is always near. “Hey, you,” I say. “Tell me about the color blue. Remember me to the color of blue. Remember blue to me.”

“What do you say? It’s clear. It’s melancholy, kind of sentimental and sad. You know faith. You know hope. That, my dear, is color. Blue, red, crimson and yellow. It’s all the same.”

And as he talks, I roll over with the phone in my ear and think about summertime, and how in the mornings when it rains hard like this, I love to lie in bed and think about stupid things: the rabbits eating my garden, the little girl next door who screams in my windows, *The magic never stops*, the UPS man who feeds the Mexicans at the corner in the mornings, and all the things I have come to know. And now as William sings *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* a little too dramatically I think, there is a small fat dog who lies on my feet, snoozing on his back, snoring and grunting, a lackadaisical paw in the air. Today is Monday. The painters are coming to paint the kitchen. Tomorrow is Tuesday. They will come again arriving with their buckets of hope and color. When they knock, the dog will go “woof,” but it will be such a sorry bark. He will be far too tired to get up and go to the door. I might, though. I might put this notebook aside, pull myself out of bed, pad to the door in my bare feet, smiling and sleepy, and say welcome to my world, I am nobody, but I am different from who I was.