

KNOCK KNOCK

I was about to walk into the VA hospital when someone called my name. I turned around and saw that it was Jay, a girl from school. This was a week after my dad had come home from Iraq. Although when I say “home” I really mean “the VA hospital.” And when I say “come” I really mean “brought.” Because my dad wasn’t coming, or going, anywhere on his own: in Iraq he’d been shot in the head and was in a coma and for the whole week had just lay there in the hospital bed all the time with his eyes closed, hooked up to machines that every once in a while made fed-up sighing sounds, like they were sick of breathing for him. His doctors and nurses wouldn’t tell me if my dad would ever wake up. “We can’t make any promises,” the doctors said. But they wouldn’t tell us that he *wouldn’t* wake up, either. “Miracles do happen,” the nurses said. This—“miracles do happen”—was something my mom often
90 said to my dad whenever he’d promised that he really *was* going to get up off the couch and find a job that day. She’d also said it when my dad told her that, since he couldn’t find a job and since she couldn’t stop giving him grief about it, he was going to the army recruiting office at the mall and joining up. After he joined up, my mom stopped saying “miracles do happen” and started saying that this was the stupidest, most selfish thing my dad had ever done, and that she’d never forgive him if he didn’t come home in one piece. After my dad hadn’t come home in one piece, my mom hadn’t said much of anything, and wouldn’t go visit him in the VA hospital, either. Anyway, when I went home and told my mom that the nurses said that miracles do happen, my mother said, “I’m sorry, Miller, but they don’t.” Which was maybe why I hadn’t told anyone—not my friends at school, not my teachers—that my dad was back from Iraq and in the VA hospital. But when Jay asked me what I was doing in front of the VA hospital, I figured it didn’t make much sense to lie about it, and so I said: “I’m here to see my dad.”

“Me, too,” she said.

I hadn’t known that Jay’s dad was in the VA hospital or even that he was in the army in the first place, but I wasn’t surprised. There was a big base right outside town. Most of the kids at school were related to someone who was in Iraq, or someone who was about to go there, or someone who had just come back.

Anyway, after that, Jay and I walked into the hospital together: through the sliding doors, and past the woman at the front desk who gave us a quick little smile before looking back at her computer. Just past the woman were two swinging doors. My dad's room was on the other side of them. I pointed at them and said to Jay, "My dad's room is through there."

"My dad's on the *second* floor," Jay said and started walking toward the elevator, which was across the hall from the swinging doors. The way Jay emphasized the word "second" it made me think that the patients on the second floor were different than the patients on the first; that they were, somehow, *better* than the patients on the first floor. I knew what I'd find once I pushed open the swinging doors in front of me: the hall would be barely lit, and there'd be no noise coming from the rooms except for the machines in them, and in the vending machine room at the end of the hall there would be someone standing in front of the machine and staring at it, blankly, like he or she was waiting for the machine to make up its mind. That was the first floor. Just thinking about it made me want to be on any other floor in the hospital but that one.

"Hey," I said to Jay. "Can I come with you?"

"Why?"

"I don't know," I said. I tried to come up with a reason. "I just don't think I've ever met your dad before," I finally said.

"I'm pretty sure you haven't," Jay said. She pushed the up button and waited. The elevator doors opened. She walked in the elevator and then turned to look at me, a shy smile on her face. "I guess that'd be OK," she finally said. The doors started closing. She put her hand in between them; they stopped, re-opened, and I got in.

The elevator doors opened at the second floor, and we got out and walked down the hall. It was full of patients. They were getting their exercise. The patients with two legs were walking on their own, or with their arms hooked through the arms of nurses, or wives, or husbands, or physical therapists. I saw a lady on crutches; she had one leg. The other leg was almost completely gone: the leg of her pajamas was folded up to the middle of her thigh and pinned there. When she swung on the crutches, the pinned pajama leg flared to the side. Her pajamas were pink with flowers; there were towels folded at the top of each crutch, over the rubber part that went under the armpit. The towels were pink, too. There was a man next to her. He was using a walker, although he had two legs. I wondered what was wrong with him

until I noticed there was a tube running out of his stomach into a clear sack attached to his walker. The tube was very wide and the sack was very big, and both were filled with something that was the color of mud. It looked too brown and murky to be blood, but I didn't know what else it could be. The man was doubled over a little, and every time he moved the walker, the tube swung and the man made a hissing sound behind his teeth. The man and the woman were standing really close to each other, even though the sack was on the woman's side of the walker. My first thought was that she must have been really in love with him to be standing that close to the sack. But maybe they were only standing so close to each other because the hall was so crowded.

Because it *was* crowded. Full of people who seemed normal enough except for one or two things that made them much different. It was like walking through a mall in a foreign country. I was happy to have a guide. I followed Jay as she snaked in and out of the crowd. The hallway was in a U shape. She walked down one side of the hallway, around the curve of the U, then stopped at the second door. I stopped a few steps behind her, because now that we were here, I wasn't sure she'd really want me to come in. But she turned and waved at me to come on. So I did.

92

This is what I saw. I saw Jay's father lying belly down on the table. The table was on wheels and was next to Jay's father's bed, which was also on wheels. Jay's father was about as old as my dad, which is to say, not old enough to be considered an old man, but old enough to wonder how old you had to be before they wouldn't let you into the army. He was unshaven and looked dirty, even in the eyes, which were pale, pale blue and watery. Maybe because of the pain. Because Jay's father wasn't alone. There was another guy, a nurse or therapist, leaning over Jay's father, rotating his stumps. I don't know how else to say it. He took Jay's father's left stump in both his hands, rotated it clockwise a few times, then counterclockwise a few times. Then he put the left stump on the table, lifted the right one, and did the same. The stumps were wrapped in Ace bandages. I had two thoughts. First was, *Thank god my dad still has his legs*. And second: *I wonder what his stumps look like under the bandages*. I was staring at the bandages when Jay's father looked in my direction and caught me.

"I'm sorry," I said. That startled the therapist. He dropped Jay's father's right stump and looked at me. His eyes were a much darker blue, much more alert, much less watery. He had a crew cut, and his arms had muscles

you could see even when he was just standing there and not doing anything physical. He looked more like a soldier than Jay's father did.

"Hey, Jay," the therapist said, like they were buddies. But Jay didn't say anything back, which told me they weren't. She walked over and kissed her dad on the top of the head and said, "Hi, Daddy." Jay's father turned his head to the right and smiled up at Jay, then looked at me and smiled, but the smile was different. I once read a book about an especially hungry spider meeting an especially stupid fly. Jay's father smiled at me the way the spider, in the book, had smiled at the fly. The therapist was watching all this, but he clearly didn't know what to make of it, or me. "Hey," he said to me.

"Hey," I said back. The therapist seemed to want more from me than just that, though, so I also said, "I'm Miller. Jay and I are in the same class at school. My dad's on the first floor."

"Gotcha," the therapist said.

"Knock knock," Jay's father said to me. His voice was rough and dry. I wondered when the last time he'd talked to someone was. I wondered if someone would even *want* to talk to him. His face was angry and tense.

"Daddy," Jay said.

"Excuse me?" I said. I mean, I knew what to say next, except I couldn't imagine that's what Jay's father wanted me to say next. But he did.

"As in the joke," he said. "Knock knock."

"Daddy," Jay said. This was clearly something her dad did—told knock-knock jokes to strangers—and I wasn't sure if Jay was mad or just pretending to be mad. She rolled her eyes at him, then at me, and so I knew she was just pretending.

"Who's there?" I said.

"9/11."

"9/11 who?"

An expression washed over Jay's father's face—not outrage, but sadness and disappointment. Just like that, he became a totally different guy, in the face. He probably would have been a great actor if he hadn't been missing both his legs. "You said you'd never forget," he whispered. Then he laughed. It was the kind of joke the teller had to laugh at, because he couldn't be sure anyone else would. Jay didn't laugh, maybe because she'd already heard the joke. She did smile at me in a sheepish, "My dad thinks he's a card," sort of way, though, and when she did that, I hated her, so much. Because I knew my mother was right, that miracles don't happen and that Jay's dad would

leave the hospital and go home and mine wouldn't, and also because I could see our futures, Jay's and mine, and Jay's was full: in it there was her, and her dad, and his jokes, and his missing legs, and who knew what else. But in my future there was nothing. I don't mean that it was empty. I mean that it was full of guys like Jay's father, guys you were supposed to feel sorry for and not jealous of, messed-up guys who my dad would never even have the chance to be.

"I'm going to go see my dad now," I told Jay, but she didn't seem to be paying attention to me anymore. Instead, she was anxiously watching the therapist, who had put his hands back on her father's stumps. The therapist's face looked determined and mad, like he hadn't found Jay's father's joke even a little bit funny. His biceps went to attention and stayed there, quivering.

"Ready?" the therapist said.

"Hell no," Jay's father said. But the therapist went back to rotating his stumps anyway.