

The nurse is at the end of his shift. That's obvious. A nest of purple wrinkles shades his eyes. His hair is greasy and unkempt. A yellow stain has long ago solidified on one of his sleeves.

When I tell him who I'm there to see, he raises an eyebrow before leading me to her room.

"You're her second visitor," he tells me when he lets me in. "She's been here a week."

"I ran into a mutual acquaintance," I say. "He told me she was here."

The nurse just looks at me before he heads back down the hall—he doesn't give a damn. He just wants to go home.

When my eyes adjust to the room, I see her in the bed. What's left of her hair lay in strings across her scalp and looks to be the texture of cotton candy. But cotton candy gone bad—grayed and left to mold in some unseen corner of neglect. Her eyes are closed and only the very faint rise and fall of her body under a thin white blanket tells me she's breathing.

I turn away, orient myself. I need a second. I'm not even sure why I'm here.

The room is a nauseating pinkish color. I can't imagine this engenders feelings of health or wellness in anyone. Aren't these places supposed to be in shades of blue or green, like a sun-dappled pool or ocean? The view from the window is of a brick wall. If you crane yourself one way, you can just make out the edge of the parking lot. There's a tree there. But you can only see a few branches of it and for only as long as you can stand to contort yourself in the uncomfortable position required to spot it.

When I turn back to her, I say her name. But she does not move.

I move closer to her, but I dare not touch her.

I used to touch her. I used to touch her all over and every which way. But that was long ago. Long before I reached middle age, a bit of a paunch around my waist and rather little hair on my head. The nubile youthfulness of my once nearly hairless body is now spotted with moles and scars, my flesh overrun with a coarse pelt as if all that left my head has migrated south and multiplied like C diff.

“Mrs. Flanagan,” I whisper. Still, she doesn’t move. I won’t press it.

To wake her up and reintroduce myself might be a cruel blow, designed to strip away any remaining vestiges of memory she may have of a time when she had been, well, not young exactly, but not old, either, and certainly not wasting away in a pink room in a dismal hospital in a nameless suburb.

I don’t know why I remain here, why I take a seat next to her bed and watch her, stay with her, bear witness to a life slowly wasting away.

Maybe because I’m the only one who’s here.

* * *

I lay on her bed, naked except my boxer shorts. I was nineteen. For reasons I don’t remember, or never knew, that was the ritual: that I would remove my clothes only to my boxers and she would take care of the rest for me. She would run her hands and then her lips over my body. I was angular and hard and rangy, my ribs threatening my skin, wrists the diameter of young bamboo. She was thin, too, and perpetually tanned, her skin starting to show the wear of four decades. She, Mrs. Flanagan, was forty-six.

She had furrowed wrinkles around her eyes and a few deep bruises, almost like stains, on her shins and one on her lower thigh, but from mid-thigh up, at certain angles you’d be hard pressed to think she wasn’t my age. But nothing about her or her nudity or her offering herself up

to me so easily was ever very shocking. It seemed to just happen and it all seemed natural, a rite of passage for an otherwise bored kid who'd decided to stay in his off-campus apartment for summer break. It all seemed, somehow, normal. More shocking than anything else was seeing Mrs. Flanagan's eyes as we lay in bed. Seeing her face without her glasses; that made her appear to me far more naked than her actual nakedness did.

We met at her development's pool. She came almost every day, her eyes obscured behind gold-tinted reflective glasses, her hair short and dark with light brown highlights. She planted herself in a chaise and lay, almost entirely immobile, from mid-morning to early evening. I never saw her actually swim. Instead, every couple of hours she would raise herself off her chaise and tuck her pointer fingers under the scallop of her buttocks to extract her suit. Then she would lower herself into the deep end, ramrod straight without any splash at all, and linger underwater for twenty seconds or so before reemerging and settling herself back on her chaise.

Eventually, we engaged in small talk while I made my way around the pool's perimeter scrubbing tiles or while packing up the umbrellas if strong winds came and skies threatened. It was a tiny pool, a "one-guarder," and often it was just the two of us.

I think I knew why she invited me to come over after my shift one day. But I don't remember worrying or being scared or excited even when I locked up and walked over and she opened the door in civilian clothes, her hair smelling freshly shampooed. She kissed me and I don't think we even spoke as she led me to her bedroom. I pulled a condom out of my wallet; it had been in there since spring. But she told me I didn't need it and then, undressed, pointed to a scar across her abdomen. The whole thing was over in ten minutes and I ran out of there, sweating and short of breath. I left my whistle behind.