

Passwords

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Corinne

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Corinne

Camille Goering

“Maman Revient Toujours”

There was a bucket beneath our steel kitchen sink that my fingertips had often traced in passing. It was blanketed in blue whiskers of mold and it held the fragile, spindly carcass of a decaying spider. The woven fibers of its web had frayed and collapsed under the weight of damp clots of tawny cleaning fluid. To me, it was as if the thimble of blood swelling its gossamer legs had evaporated into a thick mist and diffused throughout the viscous air of the kitchen cabinet, perforating the air around it. There was no practical use for a bucket like that one, no way to absolve it of the blood crusted into its malachite wrinkles and so the kitchen cupboard remained, for the most part, sealed in quarantine.

There are certain memories that coil up and dry in the recesses of a growing brain, radiating tides of poison that occasionally swell up to crash on the shores of consciousness. That morning, she awoke in pain. Her head was boiling with the tenebrous ghost of a malevolent cloud. If only I had heard the dry snap of the fractured vein behind her eyes... But my obstinate adolescence kept me from acknowledging any weakness on her part. She had but one request, that I allow her to sleep off the choking fog that chewed through the frail tissue of her crumbling brain, that I perform the menial tasks that weighed so heavily upon her that day. And so, with a calloused eye and a flick of apathy, I shuddered and without hesitation, turned my gaze from my mother for the last time.

First came the fragile moan, like the brushing wings of a bird, softly and echoing like wind against my window. She strained to slur out my name and it crawled from the tip of her heavy tongue across the greased panels of our cedar floor, to expire at my ears. And in that moment, I could taste the hot nausea that accompanied each word, I could feel the bursting cisterns of pain that flooded her body. And with a caged sigh, I followed the bruised tendrils of her voice to the kitchen, flooded with light. I do not remember touching the floor with the soles of my feet, but rather, hovering above the blemished surface of the carpet beneath me, hovering to the golden light tinged with blue of the kitchen tiles. Memories are cruel and time coats pain with sugar and molasses of deceit. I have always been a master of deceit.

She was crumbling slowly to the floor and the way I remember it, flecks

of her skin took off in flight, clouding the windows and disintegrating softly. She was quietly peeling away and I watched. My palms were wet and warm; unmistakably the skin of a tender adolescent. They slipped over the harsh plastic of the chair that I placed before her and she fell quickly into it, leaving her breath before my face, hovering in the air like a swarm of insect wings. The tremor of her fingers held before her eyes, reflected like a butterfly and I began to notice her absence. "I cannot see you, where are you." Those words thickened the fluids of my body, and my limbs stiffened with the frost of panic. I danced before her eyes, clumsily, delicately: the steps of an improvised ballet. I brandished my tears like bits of rope and begged her to grasp onto them, to rise up out of the chasm that sucked at her. The flu. I thought it was the flu. Her physician asked me to wait, to wait, to wait. I waited. And the telephone was so pale, so futile that I thought it would float up out of my slippery fingers and out into the radiating glimmer of the afternoon's azure sky. I filled a mason jar with warm water and she began to cry. I took her hand, I kissed her damp hair and still she did not see me before her, always before her, waving like a frightened boy flickers a lighter before the window of his sweetheart. Her arms were like perishing grocery meat, warm and laced with gray and I carried them on the bones of my shoulders. And her hair was like a willow tree and it was a dying halcyon and I wanted to tear it out and open her head and drain it of the poison beneath. I took her into a room, a room glazed with spirals of light and her legs were swallowed up by the lips of the gray couch and everything was gray and her eyes had been gray but they weren't anymore. Her eyes were nothing anymore and I tried to grab them, I tried to pick them up off the floor but she threw up. And I wanted to gather the bits of her stomach, the bits of herself and I wanted to shove them back into her twisted mouth, I wanted to stifle her cries with my hands, I wanted to fill her throat with cotton. I wanted it to stop, I wanted it to pause for a second, to give me a second so that I could breathe, so that I could try to suck out the poison and the gray and the vomit off of the floor. But her screams were now splintering the hot air and I was nothing but a mirage before the hollow whites of her eyes and she grasped my hands and my arms and she cried and cried and cried and cried. She cried so much I thought that it would fill my lungs up with water and salt and we would sleep there together, drenched in the chloroform of our own mortality and everything would be okay. Everything will be okay. Okay. How many times did they tell me that. How many times did I tell myself: everything will be okay.

And everything was okay and it always will be okay. But in that moment I saw O K A Y and the letters bubbled in solitary confinement and they would not pair up, they would not seal and they filled with cavities and suddenly the word meant nothing and I was thirsty and I wanted only three numbers. I was placing a call and it needed only three numbers.

Nine is the square of three. Followed by two ones it's a beautiful number. Three and one: an incandescent daydream. It hardly exists. Lucky thirteen, lucky thirteen. I had just turned thirteen. The thirteenth floor of my apartment building had never been built for fear of incumbent mortality. Rather amusing that a human being could envisage mastering fate with a whip. The people in my building liked that there was no thirteenth floor but I did not. Even as my mother pulled away from our home tangled in a starched white sheet, prodded by sterile gloves and the chortling glimmer of the metal stretcher, I wished that there had been a thirteenth floor. Sometimes I blanket the thirteenth year of my life with delicate brush strokes and it shimmers and fades. Sometimes I pretend that I was never thirteen and so I etched it with graphite into the blue arteries of my wrist and it keeps my phantoms from evaporating still. It always will. Sometimes I pretend that there is a thirteenth floor and it is carved into the papery skin of my arm and I wander its rooms in silence.

I often catch my breath on the details of that day. The sallow spaces in her neck. The pale cartoon of a horse on my soiled shirt. And the bucket.

I came home and the bucket was there, by the side of the couch that rippled still with the lingering contours of her body. Pools of hot amber and crimson shadowing its surface. The acrid smell rising from it and the water glass that still held what I dreaded were bits of skin from her trembling lips. And the bucket pulsated in the dying ivory twilight, and her vomit was like the opaque silt of the ocean. I scrubbed and washed and the webs between my fingers bled with the scars of the effort and still, the tears did not come. The bucket found its way to the cupboard once more and the spider had shattered beneath the weight of my mother's retching pain. And the green bucket crouches there still, the phosphorescent glow of soap over my mother's spit. A mother is much larger than a spider. What I thought I could contain crept out between the grains of the wood, beneath the cracks of the cupboard door and filled the wrinkles in the walls of our home. It whispered into our beds and settled like dust over antiquated furniture. It gnawed on towels and clothing and pillows like the jaws of a moth and it infused each

and every object around us. And it was then that our movements slowed and strained through the viscosity of the infected air but we could not bring ourselves to throw away the bucket beneath the kitchen sink. I peeled away all of the skin on my shoulders and my palms ceased to sweat and I awoke one morning with traces of silvery thread woven into my hair. What I had believed I could scour with soap, what I had thought I could refuse to acknowledge, had engendered a spirit all of its own and etched itself into every surface of my body, like the number thirteen on the bones of my wrist. The green bucket crouches there still, and I wait patiently for the phantom markings on my body to flare before my eyes. I wait for the thirteenth floor in the buttons of my elevator. I wait for it all to be okay.



White Alligator

Richie Siegel