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COUNT ME DOWN TO THE QUIET
CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 113

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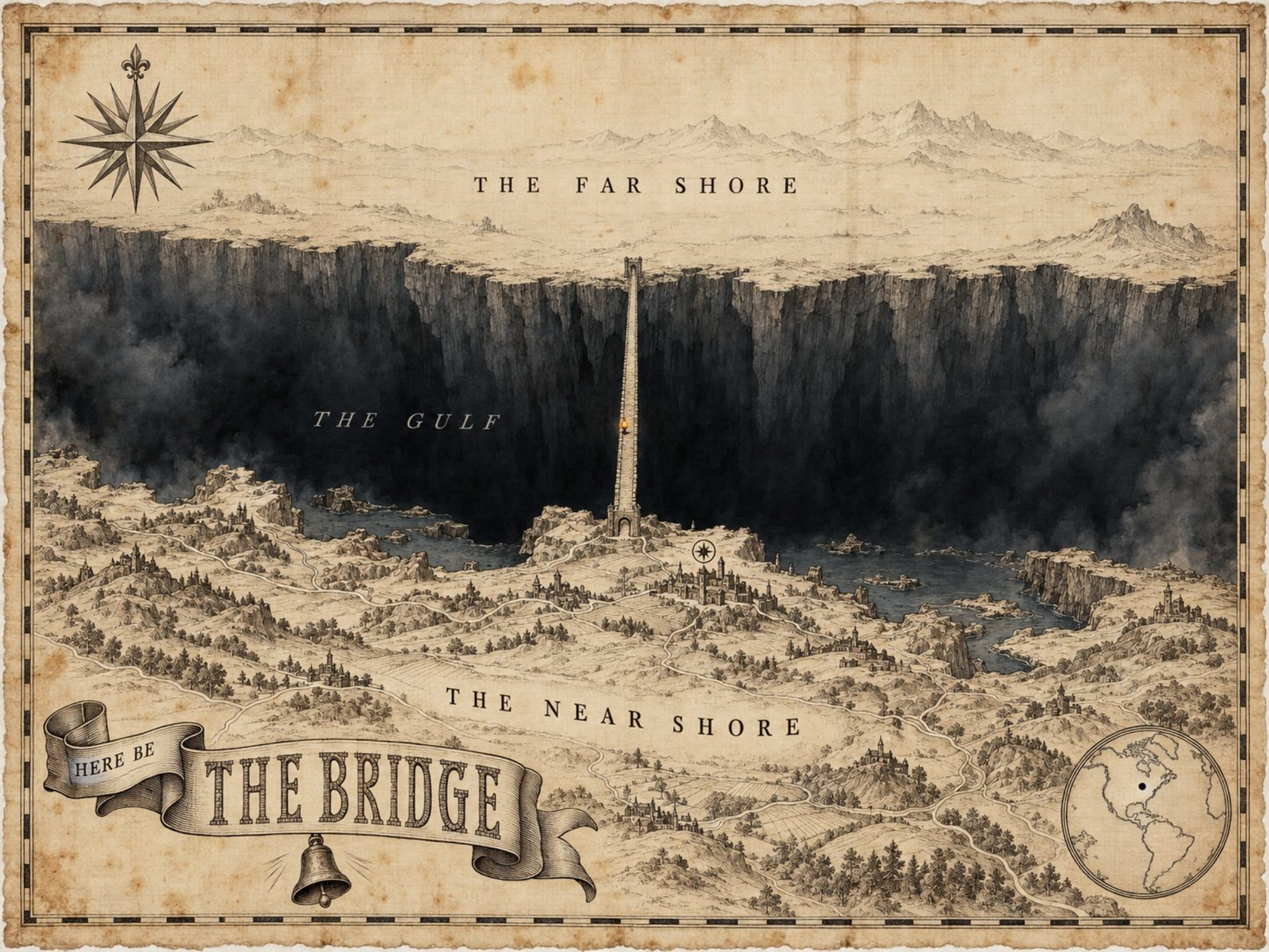
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THE FAR SHORE
THE GULF
THE NEAR SHORE
HERE BE
THE BRIDGE

THE BOOK BEFORE

Each of these books stands on its own, and can be read in any order. The one before this was about a woman named Dana.

Dana Whitlock was a respiratory therapist in Albuquerque, which is a long way of saying her whole job was other people's breathing. She was good at it. She was calm when everyone else was not. And she had not slept a whole night in nearly seven years.

On the longest night of the year, a December night in 2019, she was in a friend's truck coming home from a party, and there was a crash, and a boy of twelve on a bicycle did not go home. She was the passenger. That is what she told the deputy, and that is what the man who was driving told him too. He went to prison for it. There is a white cross on the side of a county road with the boy's name on it, and his mother used to kneel there on Sundays.

For nearly seven years Dana took the long way round, to avoid that road.

Then a text came at three in the morning, from a number she did not know. Four words: *it helped me sleep.* And underneath it, a link to a clinic on the coast of Mexico, a white house above the sea, that promised one night with a root from Africa would take everything you ever did wrong off you, like a coat.

It was illegal at home. People had died taking it. Dana was a medical professional, and she knew exactly what it could do to a heart, and she had one small secret she did not put on her form.

She drove to the border, and walked across, and lay down in a room with a heart monitor, where the people who had been there said the root plays your whole life back to you, like a film.

SYNOPSIS

Nora Vance has put twenty thousand people to sleep, and brought every one of them back. She is a paediatric anaesthetist at a children's hospital in Los Angeles, the one the surgeons ask for by name, the one with the steady hands and the cap printed with little moons, and for twenty-six years she has sent frightened children down into the dark and called them home with their own names. When they wake and ask her where they were, she tells them the same thing she has always told them. *You were asleep, sweetheart. You were just asleep.*

She has never once asked whether that is true.

Then her husband dies on the kitchen floor on a hot night in August, and his heart is given to a boy she will never be allowed to meet. Fourteen months later a soft-spoken twelve-year-old named Sorush comes in for a routine check on a transplanted heart, goes under for twenty minutes, and wakes saying things only a dead man could know.

There is a medicine in Nora's cabinet that does more than sleep. The people who have taken it come back describing a vast grey room where everyone who has ever died is waiting, together, patient. Nora has spent her whole life sending children to the edge of that room. Now, for the first time, she goes in to look — for the room, for the boy's secret, for her husband. And each time she goes a little further down, and each time it is a little harder to climb back up.

She knows exactly how to send a soul under. What she is about to learn is what it costs to come back.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is a book about a woman who spends her life at the border between the sleeping and the waking, and who has never once wondered what is on the other side, until she has a reason to go and look.

The medicine in this book is real, and so is everything the book says about it. It is one of the most useful medicines there is, on the list the world keeps of the ones a country cannot do without. It is given to children, and to soldiers bleeding in the backs of helicopters, because it is remarkably kind to the breath. At larger doses it does the stranger thing this book is about, the thing the people who first studied it had to invent a new word for. Both of those are the same medicine. That is the whole of the problem with it, and the whole of the fascination.

The accounts of the experience itself are drawn from a great many real ones: from the first human volunteers in 1964, from the explorers who went too far and did not all come back, and from the thousands of ordinary people who have tried, in the middle of the night, to write down for strangers a thing they could not explain to their friends. The resemblance between what they describe and what people describe who have nearly died is real, and is something serious scientists have studied, and is left in this book exactly as unresolved as it is in life.

The boy’s name, and what it means, and the old belief behind it, are real too. Everything medical here is as true as I could make it. Nora, her husband, the boy and his mother are invented, and so is the hospital, though the children in it are the truest thing in the book.

This book does not tell anyone to take anything. It is, if it is about anything, about the hardest thing love is ever asked to do, which is to let go of a hand and call it mercy.

Chew Z

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I. THE MOON LADY

1.

Children are the best patients in the world.

I mean that. I have been a doctor for twenty-six years and I have looked after every kind of person there is, and nobody comes close. Adults lie to you. They say they had nothing to eat when they had a muffin in the car. They say it doesn't hurt when it does, because they don't want to be a nuisance, or it hurts much more than it does, because they want you to hurry. Children don't do any of that. A child tells you exactly what is true, in the fewest possible words, and then asks you a question you can't answer.

"Will I dream?"

"Can you make me dream about a dog?"

"When I'm asleep, will you hold Mister Bun's hand too? He's scared."

That last one was a girl called Rosa, five years old, with a hole in her heart the size of a lentil. Mister Bun was a grey rabbit with one ear chewed flat. I held his paw in my left hand while I put the mask on Rosa's face with my right, and I held it for the whole operation, two hours and ten minutes, because a promise to a five-year-old is a promise. My hand went numb. The surgeon thought I had gone mad. Rosa is nine now. She sends me a drawing every Christmas. Mister Bun is in all of them.

I am a paediatric anaesthetist. That is a long word for a simple job. When a child needs an operation, or a scan they have to lie still for, or a needle somewhere a needle hurts, I make them go away while it happens. And then I bring them back.

People think the surgeon is the important one. The surgeon is important. But the surgeon only has to fix the thing. I have to keep the child alive while it is being fixed. I watch their heart and their breathing and their blood, every second, for as long as it takes, and I make tiny changes, a little more of this, a little less of that, so the child floats at exactly the right depth. Not too shallow, or they feel it. Not too deep, or they don't come back.

It is like holding someone underwater. Gently. And knowing exactly when to let go.

2.

I work at Holloway Children's Hospital, on the east side of Los Angeles, in a building that looks, from the freeway, like a stack of coloured children's blocks somebody started and then gave up on.

Inside, it is the kindest place I know.

The lobby has a ceiling painted like the night sky. Dark blue, with hundreds of little gold stars, and the constellations drawn in thin white lines, and a big pale moon in one corner. A man who worked in the film studios painted it for nothing, thirty years ago, after his son died upstairs. Children lie on their backs on the lobby floor to look at it. Nobody tells them not to.

The elevators don't play music. They play birdsong. On Thursdays the clown doctors come, two women in red noses and white coats with rubber chickens in the pockets, and walk the wards blowing bubbles. On Tuesdays a golden retriever called Biscuit visits the cancer floor, and children who haven't smiled in a week roll over in bed to put their faces in his fur. There is a room on the third floor full of dressing-up clothes, and you will often see a bald girl in a ball gown pushing her own drip stand down the corridor like a lady with a parasol.

And the children are kind to each other in a way that grown-ups have forgotten how to be. I have seen a boy with leukaemia, who had nothing left but a sticker collection, give his whole collection, all of it, to a new boy who was crying in the elevator. I have seen a girl with no legs teach a girl with one leg how to swear in Spanish. I have heard two eight-year-olds in a ward at midnight, both too sick to sleep, talking in the dark about what they would be when they grew up, completely sure that they would.

People ask me how I can bear to work there. I tell them the truth. Most days I can't believe they pay me.

3.

Every anaesthetist has a way of putting children to sleep. Mine is the cap.

I wear a green surgical cap, the kind that ties at the back, printed all over with tiny white moons. Crescents and full moons and half

moons, hundreds of them. When a child comes into the operating room, frightened, holding a parent's hand or a rabbit's paw, I bend down so my head is level with theirs and I say:

"Look at my hat. Do you know what those are?"

And they always know. Even the ones who can't talk yet point.

"That's right. Moons. Because I'm the Moon Lady. And in a minute I'm going to send you on a little trip to the moon. You'll float up there for a while, and have a look around, and when you're finished I'll be right here to bring you home. Okay?"

They nearly always say okay. Children will agree to almost anything if you tell them it's a trip to the moon.

Then I put the mask over their face, the soft see-through one that smells of strawberry or bubblegum, and I say, "Count backwards from ten for me," and they start. *Ten. Nine. Eight.* Most of them don't get past six. And I count with them, under my breath, all the way down to one, even after they've stopped. I don't know why I do that. Habit. I have always been a counter. I count drops and breaths and heartbeats and minutes. I count steps on stairs. Someone who knew me well once said I hummed when I counted, the same three notes over and over, without knowing I was doing it.

He was right. I do.

A man gave me that cap. I have six of them now. I'll tell you about him later.

4.

There is a thing children say, sometimes, on the way back up.

You turn off the gas, or stop the drip, and you wait. And you watch the small face, and you say their name, softly, over and over, until the eyelids flutter. And the eyes open, swimming, not looking at anything yet. And then they find you. They see the moons on your cap. And sometimes, not often, maybe one in fifty, they ask:

"Where was I?"

I always gave the same answer. Twenty-six years, the same answer.

"You were asleep, sweetheart. You were just asleep."

And they nod, and close their eyes again, and that's the end of it. They never remember asking.

I want to tell you something I'm not proud of. In twenty-six years, I never once wondered whether that answer was true.

I know the science, of course. I could draw you the brain and show you which parts go quiet and which drugs quiet them, and how. I could give you a lecture. I have given that lecture, to students, in a room with bad coffee. But I never asked the other question. The one the children were asking. Not *what happens in the brain*, but *where were you*. Where does a person go, for those forty minutes, when the body is lying on my table with its eyes taped shut and nobody is home?

I didn't ask because I didn't need to. They always came back. That was my job, and I was good at it, and they always, always came back.

Almost always.

5.

I should tell you about the rest of the building too. Because it isn't all moons and golden retrievers.

Children's hospitals have floors, the way the old maps had edges. The higher you go and the further you walk from the lobby, the darker it gets.

The first floor is broken arms and tonsils and ear tubes. Happy floor. Children go home the same day with a popsicle and a sticker that says *I WAS BRAVE*.

The third floor is the cancer floor. It is cheerful, deliberately, ferociously cheerful, painted yellow and orange, with Biscuit and the clowns and the dressing-up room. It has to be. Behind the doors, children are being poisoned on purpose, slowly, so that the poison kills the cancer a little faster than it kills the child.

The fourth floor is the burns unit. It is very warm, because burnt skin can't hold heat, and it smells of a particular cream. The children there have bandages that have to be changed every day, and every day it is agony, so I go up and put them to sleep for it.

Every day, sometimes for weeks. Some of them start to call me before I'm through the door. *Moon Lady. Moon Lady. Please.*

And then there is the basement. Under the lobby, under the painted stars, is the emergency department, and inside it is a room called the trauma bay. That is where the ambulances bring the children who were fine this morning.

6.

I am going to tell you about some of the children in the trauma bay. I'm not going to make it pretty. But I want you to understand how it looks to me, because it doesn't look to me the way it would look to you.

A two-year-old boy who climbed out of a bedroom window in Boyle Heights while his mother was in the shower. Fourth floor. He landed on a car roof, which saved his life. When he came in, the back of his head was soft.

A girl of three pulled out of a backyard pool in the Valley in July. Nobody saw her fall in. It was a party, forty people, music, a barbecue, and every grown-up thought another grown-up was watching. She was in the water for maybe six minutes. Drowning is silent. People think a drowning child splashes and shouts. They don't. They just go under, like a stone, very quietly, while everyone eats.

A boy of fourteen shot in the stomach outside a taco stand on Whittier Boulevard at nine on a Saturday night, for wearing the wrong colour shoelaces in the wrong street. His friend carried him two blocks. His friend was thirteen.

A baby of seven weeks, whose father said she fell off the sofa, and whose scans showed bleeding inside the skull and three old rib fractures, healed, from some time ago.

From outside, these are the worst things in the world. If you saw any one of them you would think about it for the rest of your life. Parents in the corridor make a sound I can't describe and won't try to.

From inside, from where I stand, at the head of the bed, they are something else. They are an airway. A blood pressure. A weight in

kilos, which gives a dose in milligrams. They are a list of jobs in the right order. *Airway first. Then breathing. Then blood.* You don't look at the face, not properly, not at first. You look at the chest rising and the number on the screen. You find the vein. You count. You make the child go deep, very deep, so that they feel nothing while the surgeons do what they do, and then you hold them there, at the right depth, for as long as it takes.

It isn't that we don't feel it. We feel it. But we feel it later. In the car, mostly. Or in the shower. Or at four in the morning, three weeks later, for no reason, standing in a supermarket looking at yoghurt.

In the moment, you have to turn the child into a case. A case is something you can heal. A child, in the moment, you can't bear.

The boy on the car roof went home six weeks later and talks a little slowly now and does well at school. The baby with the old rib fractures went to her grandmother. The boy from the taco stand, the one with the shoelaces, lived.

The girl from the pool didn't.

I brought her back. I want you to know that. Her heart, I mean. We got her heart going again after forty minutes, and I kept her body breathing for three days upstairs, and her mother sat beside her singing a song in Spanish about a little frog, over and over. But I knew, from the first scans, what the six minutes in the water had done. The heart came back. The child didn't.

That's the part of the job nobody puts on the hospital website. Sometimes you bring the body back, perfectly, every number right, and the person doesn't come with it.

And you are standing at the head of the bed, and the screen is beautiful, and you think: *then where are they?*

I didn't let myself think it for long. I went home.

7.

I live in Silver Lake, in a small wooden house on a steep street, with a lemon tree in the yard and a view, if you stand on the toilet lid and look out of the bathroom window, of a slice of the reservoir.

I live there alone.

I eat off paper plates. I know that sounds strange. I have a perfectly good dishwasher and a perfectly good sink, and twelve plates from a wedding list in a cupboard above it, and I haven't used any of them for over a year. I buy paper plates in packs of a hundred at the big supermarket on Glendale Boulevard, and I eat standing up at the kitchen counter, and I put the plate in the bin. I don't sit at the kitchen table much. I don't look at the floor.

The floor is new. I had all the tiles replaced last year. White ones, very plain. It cost four thousand dollars and made no difference at all.

I am fifty-two. I'm told I'm good company. I have friends, who invite me to things, and I go to some of them. I run on Sunday mornings round the reservoir, three times, which is about five and a half miles. I read crime novels in the bath. I am the best paediatric anaesthetist at Holloway Children's, and I'm not boasting, because there's a list of who the surgeons ask for, and I'm at the top of it.

I am fine. That is what I tell people, and it's true in every way that can be measured.

But at night I don't sleep much. I lie on the right-hand side of the bed, which isn't my side, with the window open, and I listen to the freeway, which sounds like the sea if you let it. And I count. Breaths, mostly. My own. Sixteen a minute, when I'm calm. I count them until it gets light.

8.

At two in the morning in the last week of September, I was called in for a girl called Lily.

Six years old. Back seat of a car on the 5 freeway, hit from the side by a truck whose driver had fallen asleep. Her father was driving. He walked away with a cut on his chin. Lily's side of the car was folded in half.

She had a broken thigh bone, a torn spleen, and bleeding into her belly. She needed an operation fast. I put her to sleep in the trauma bay with her blood pressure dropping and her eyes rolling, and kept her alive for three hours while the surgeons took her spleen out and pinned her leg, and gave her four bags of other people's blood. At one point her heart slowed right down, thirty, twenty-eight, and I

gave her a drug to kick it back, and it came back. It was a good night's work. I'm proud of it.

At six in the morning, in the recovery room, she woke up.

I said her name, softly, over and over, *Lily, Lily, sweetheart*, until her eyes opened. They swam about. They found my cap.

She looked at the moons for a long time.

Then she said, quite clearly, in the flat voice small children use for important facts:

"There's a big room. With lots of people waiting."

I smiled. I said what I always said. "You were asleep, sweetheart. You were just asleep."

She frowned at me. A proper frown. As if I'd got a sum wrong.

"No," she said. "I was in the big room. They're waiting for their turn."

Then her eyes closed and she was asleep again, properly this time, and her breathing went long and slow.

The nurse in recovery was a woman called Ruth, who has been at Holloway even longer than me, and who has seen everything twice. She was writing Lily's numbers on the chart. She didn't look up.

"They say all sorts on the way up," she said. "Last week one told me he'd been riding a giraffe."

"I know," I said.

I know they do. I know it's the drugs. I know the brain does strange things on the way back, and that a child half-awake will tell you a dream as if it's the news. I've heard it a thousand times.

But I stood there longer than I needed to, looking at Lily's face, with my hand on the rail of her bed.

A big room. With lots of people waiting.

I don't know why that one stayed. It just did.

9.

Two weeks later, on a Monday evening, the twelfth of October, I was sitting at the kitchen table for once, with my reading glasses on, looking at the next day's list on my phone. I don't usually sit there. I sat there that night. I'm not sure why.

The list for Tuesday was ordinary. A hernia. Two sets of ear tubes. A scan for a boy with a tumour behind his eye.

And at eleven o'clock, in the heart catheter lab, a routine check on a transplant patient.

Children who have had a new heart have to be checked for years, to make sure their body isn't attacking it. The test is called a biopsy. A thin tube goes into a big vein in the neck, and is threaded down into the heart, and a tiny pair of jaws on the end takes a few pieces of the heart muscle, each one smaller than a grain of rice, to look at under a microscope. It doesn't hurt the heart. But the child has to lie perfectly still, so I put them to sleep for it. They're quick. Twenty minutes. I've done dozens.

The patient's name was Sorush [soh-ROOSH] Karimi. A Persian name. I didn't know what it meant. I didn't think to wonder. Twelve years old. Forty-one kilos. No allergies. Many anaesthetics before, no problems. A heart transplant fourteen months ago, for a disease he had been born with, that had slowly let his own heart stretch and swell until it was too big and too weak to pump.

Under the history, the date of the transplant.

The nineteenth of August, 2025.

I looked at it.

I put the phone face down on the table. I put my hands flat on either side of it, the way you hold a table on a boat.

It's a date. It's only a date. I know how many children in California have a new heart every year. Dozens. Several a month. It meant nothing.

I said that to myself, out loud, in the empty kitchen. *It means nothing.*

Then I got up, and put my paper plate in the bin, and went to bed, and lay on the side that isn't mine, and looked at the ceiling, and counted.

I counted all night. I didn't get past four hundred before I lost my place, and started again.

FROM THE CEILING

The Men with Their Eyes Open

Michigan, 1964

In the summer of 1964, the biggest walled prison in the world stood in a small town in southern Michigan called Jackson. It held thousands of men behind walls you could see from miles away.

Inside those walls, a drug company ran a small hospital ward of its own. It was a clean, quiet room with beds and a nurses' desk. The company tested new medicines there, on men who had volunteered. A volunteer was paid a little money. Sometimes a good word went into his file. And for an afternoon he got to lie in a clean bed in a quiet room, away from the noise of thousands of other men, which was worth more than the money.

That August, the company had a new medicine to test.

It was meant to put people to sleep for operations. The old medicines did that well, but they were dangerous. They could stop a person breathing. This new one was supposed to be safer. It didn't have a name yet. It had a number on the bottle, the way new medicines do.

A scientist came from the university at Ann Arbor, forty miles away, to watch. He was a careful man. He had studied the medicine's older cousin, and he knew that one had done strange things to the people who took it. He wanted to see what this one did.

So, on a summer day, a man in prison clothes lay down on a bed in the clean room, and a doctor put a needle into a vein in his arm, and slowly pushed in a small amount of clear liquid.

Here is what the scientist saw.

The man's eyes did not close.

That was the first strange thing. When you are put to sleep, your eyes close. Your face goes soft. You look asleep. This man's eyes stayed open. They looked at the ceiling. They did not blink much. They were not looking at anything in particular, and they were not

looking at nothing. They were looking at something that wasn't in the room.

His body went completely still. Not relaxed. Still. Like furniture.

The doctors spoke to him. He didn't answer. They touched him. He didn't flinch. They pricked his skin with a pin, which is how you test whether someone can feel pain, and nothing happened at all. He was breathing, slowly and well. His heart was beating, slightly faster than before. His eyes were open.

He was there. And he wasn't there.

The scientist wrote it down later in plain words. The men, he said, were like zombies, with their eyes open, totally disconnected from what was around them. They were in the room, and they were not part of it, the way a photograph of a person is in a room.

He tried the medicine on other men. It was always the same. The eyes open. The stillness. The face of someone looking very far away. And then, after ten minutes or so, the eyes began to move again, and blink, and find the doctors. And the men came back.

They came back strange. Some of them were frightened. Some of them laughed. Some of them were sick. Some of them couldn't explain where they'd been, and stopped trying.

The scientists had a problem. They had to describe what this medicine did, in a medical journal, in words other doctors would understand. And none of the old words fitted. The men weren't asleep; their eyes were open. They weren't awake; they couldn't answer. They weren't unconscious, exactly. They were somewhere else.

One evening the scientist was describing it to his wife, at home. *They're disconnected*, he said. *Cut off. Their bodies are here and they're somewhere else.*

His wife listened, and gave him a word. A word that meant *separated*. Pulled apart. The mind from the body. The person from the room.

The word stuck. It is still used, in every hospital in the world.

Here is the thing nobody wrote down.

Nobody asked the men where they went.

They wrote down the heart rates. They wrote down the breathing, and the blood pressure, and how long it took the men to come back, and whether they were sick afterwards. They wrote down that the eyes were open. They were good scientists. They wrote down everything that could be seen from the end of the bed.

But nobody sat down beside a man in prison clothes and said: *Where were you? What did you see?* And if anyone did, they didn't write the answer down.

The men went back to their cells. Some of them, no doubt, lay awake that night, looking at the ceiling, thinking about where they'd been for ten minutes with their eyes open. Some of them, maybe, told the man in the next cell. *I went somewhere. I don't know where. It was big.*

We don't know their names. They're in no book. They were the first people in the world to go there, and come back, and nobody asked.

II. THE BOY

10.

He was sitting cross-legged on the bed in the pre-op room, in a hospital gown with yellow ducks on it, reading a library book about birds.

That was the first thing I noticed. Not a phone. A book, an old one, the plastic cover gone cloudy, with a stamp from the Glendale public library inside the front. He was reading it slowly, the way old men read the newspaper, with one finger resting at the edge of the page, ready.

His mother was asleep in the chair beside him. A small woman in a delivery company's fleece, with her car keys still in her hand. She had driven nights for an app, I found out later, so she could be with him in the days. She was snoring very gently.

He was thin, the way children who have been sick a long time are thin, with knees and elbows that seemed too big for the rest of him. Dark hair, cut short. A long pale scar showed at the neck of the gown, the top of the line where they had opened his chest. He had very dark eyes, and very long eyelashes, the kind that grandmothers make a fuss about.

He looked up when I came in. He looked at me for a moment, and then at the cap, and then back at my face.

"Hello," he said. Very quietly. "You must be the Moon Lady."

"I must be," I said. "Who told you?"

"A girl on the third floor. Last year. She said you held her rabbit's hand for two hours." He put a bus ticket in the book to keep his place, and closed it. "She said you were the only one who doesn't lie."

I didn't know what to say to that. I sat down on the stool by the bed, so my head was lower than his. That's what I always do. I didn't do it on purpose this time. My legs just went.

"I'm Nora," I said. "I'm going to look after you today."

"I'm Sorush." He said it the Persian way, soft, the *r* rolled once. *soh-ROOSH.* "Most people say it wrong. You can say it how you like."

“Sorush,” I said.

He smiled. A small, grave smile, like someone giving you a mark out of ten. “That’s good. That’s nearly right.”

Then he looked at me for a long moment, the way he had looked at the cap, and said:

“You didn’t sleep last night.”

11.

I have talked to thousands of children before an anaesthetic. I know how it goes. They’re frightened, or they’re bored, or they’re showing off. They ask if it will hurt. They ask if they can keep their socks on. They want to know about the dog, or the moon, or whether they’ll get ice cream after.

Sorush was not like that. I don’t know how to explain what he was like, except to say that for the next twenty minutes I forgot that I was the doctor.

He was twelve. He spoke like someone who had been alive for a very long time and had decided, somewhere along the way, not to waste words. He spoke so softly I had to lean in. He never interrupted. When I asked him something, he thought about it before he answered, sometimes for a long time, and the answer was always exactly the size it needed to be.

I asked him how he was feeling. He said, “Good. Tired in the mornings. Not the old tired.”

I asked him what the old tired was.

He thought about it.

“Before,” he said. “When my old heart was getting big. You know it got big?”

“I know.”

“It was like carrying a bag of water up the stairs. All the time. Even lying down. You get used to it. You think that’s what being a person is.” He looked at his hands. “Then they gave me the new one, and I woke up, and I wasn’t carrying anything. I cried for an hour. The nurse thought I was in pain.” He shook his head very slightly. “I wasn’t in pain. I just didn’t know you could feel like that.”

He had been sick since he was four. He had been in this hospital more than he had been in school. He had been on a list for a heart for nineteen months, and twice they had called and said they had one, and twice it had turned out not to be right, and twice he had been sent home. He told me all this the way you'd tell someone directions. Left at the lights. Second right.

"Were you frightened?" I asked. "While you were waiting?"

He thought about that one for a long time.

"At first," he said. "Then I wasn't. I got used to the idea that I would probably die. Everybody does, in the end. I was just going to do it earlier. When I stopped being frightened of that, I stopped being frightened of most things." He looked at me. "That's the trick. Nobody tells you. You have to work it out."

I'm fifty-two years old. I have watched children die. I have never once worked that out.

"How many times have you been put to sleep?" I asked. I already knew. It was in the notes. I wanted to hear him say it.

"Thirty-one," he said. "Today's thirty-two."

"Is it scary? Going under?"

"No." He said it at once. "Going under's easy. You just let go." He picked at the duck on his gown. "Coming back's the hard part. You have to decide to."

I looked at him.

"What do you mean, decide?"

He shrugged, a small, polite shrug, as if it was obvious and he didn't want to embarrass me.

"Sometimes it's nice where you are," he said. "You have to decide to come back anyway."

12.

There's a rule, in my job, that you never tell a child more than they need to know. You don't say *needle*; you say *a little scratch*. You don't say *knife*. You never say the names of the drugs. The names are long and hard and frightening, and a frightened child is harder to put to sleep and harder to bring back.

So when Sorush asked me what I was going to give him, I did what I always do.

I touched the cap. "Do you know what these are?"

He gave me a look, a kind, patient look, that said: *I'm twelve, not four.*

"Moons," he said.

"That's right. And what I'm going to give you today is moon water. It goes in through the little tube in your hand, and it takes you on a short trip. A trip to the moon. And when you're finished up there, I'll bring you home."

He considered this.

"It's not really water," he said.

"No."

"You're not going to tell me what it really is."

"Not today," I said. "Names are heavy. You don't need to carry that one."

I don't know why I said it like that. I'd never said it like that before. He looked at me for a while with his dark eyes, and then he nodded, slowly, as if I had passed some test I hadn't known I was taking.

"Moon water," he said. "Okay."

His mother woke up then, with a start, the keys jumping in her hand. She was embarrassed. She apologised in English and then in Persian and then in English again. Her name was Parisa. She stood up and smoothed down her son's hair, which didn't need smoothing, and kissed the top of his head, and said something to him very quickly and softly in Persian. He answered in Persian, one word, and she laughed and wiped her eyes.

“What did he say?” I asked her, at the door, as they wheeled him out.

“I told him, be brave, my soul,” she said. “He said, *always*.”

13.

The heart catheter lab is a cold room full of machines. Big white X-ray arms that swing round the table on rails. Screens hung from the ceiling like televisions in a bar. Everyone in lead aprons, heavy as wet coats.

We lifted him onto the table. He was very light. I put the stickers on his chest for the monitor, and the clip on his finger, and the cuff on his arm. The monitor started its beeping. Ninety-four. A good, strong rhythm. Steady as a clock.

I tried not to listen to it.

I looked at the little plastic tube already in the back of his hand. I had the syringes laid out on my trolley in a row, labelled, the way I always lay them out. One of them was the moon water. Clear as tap water. You’d never know.

“Sorush,” I said. “I’m going to give you the moon water now. You might feel a bit strange. A bit floaty. That’s normal.”

“Okay.”

“Can you count backwards from ten for me?”

He looked up at me from the table. Not at the cap this time. At my face.

“You count,” he said. “I’ll listen.”

So I counted. I pushed the moon water into the tube, slowly, over a minute, the way you’re supposed to. *Ten. Nine. Eight.* My voice was steady. I’ve done this twenty thousand times.

Seven. Six.

His eyes didn’t close.

That’s what happens, with this drug. It’s not like the others. The others close the eyes, and the face goes slack, and the child looks asleep. This one doesn’t. The eyes stay open. They go glassy, and still, and they stare at nothing, and then they start to flick, very fast,

side to side, side to side, like someone reading a line of tiny writing over and over. The body goes still. Completely still. But the face isn't the face of someone asleep. It's the face of someone looking at something very far away. Parents hate it. We tell them not to watch.

Five. Four.

His eyes were open, flicking, fixed on the ceiling. His lips moved a little. No sound.

Three. Two. One.

"He's away," I said, to the cardiologist, the way I always say it.

And the cardiologist put the long thin tube into the vein in Sorush's neck, and threaded it down into my husband's heart, and took six pieces of it, each smaller than a grain of rice, and dropped them one by one into a little pot of liquid, like seeds.

14.

I'm getting ahead of myself. You don't know yet. I said I'd tell you about the man who gave me the cap. I'm going to tell you now, because it's the only way the rest of this makes any sense.

His name was Sam. Samuel Vance. He taught music at a public high school in Glendale for twenty-six years. Band, mostly. He played the trumpet badly and the piano well, and he could get forty teenagers who hated each other to play the same note at the same time, which I think is a kind of anaesthesia too.

We were married for twenty-four years. No children. We tried for a long time, and then there was one, for eleven weeks, and then there wasn't. After that we stopped trying, and got a dog, and then the dog died, and then it was just the two of us, which turned out to be enough. I knew I was lucky. I knew it most days.

He sang while he washed the dishes. Always the same few songs. The one he sang most was an old American folk song about a river, the one that begins *Oh Shenandoah, I long to hear you*. His grandmother sang it to him in Kentucky. He sang it slow and flat, with his hands in the sink, and when he got to *away, you rolling river* he always made a little trumpet noise with his mouth, because he thought it was funny. It was funny the first thousand times.

Once, early on, I asked him what it meant. *Rolling river.* I thought it was just a nice noise.

He dried his hands and told me. The song was old, he said, older than anyone knew, from the river traders who worked the Missouri in the eighteen hundreds. The Missouri was the great river then, wide and brown and fast, and once it had you, it carried you a thousand miles whether you liked it or not. The man in the song is in love with a girl on the bank. And the river is taking him away from her. He can't stop it. Nobody can argue with a river. So he stands in the boat and sings to her across the water, *I long to hear you*, and then he sings to the river itself, *away, you rolling river*, because the river is the thing that is doing it. And then the last line: *away, I'm bound away*. Meaning, *I have to go*. Meaning, *I'm sorry*.

"It's a goodbye song," he said, "that doesn't want to be one." And then he made the trumpet noise, and went back to the dishes.

I remembered that, later. I remembered all of it.

I never sang. I can't. I have a voice for waking children up, and that's all.

He said I hummed. When I was counting, or concentrating. The same three notes. I told him that was nonsense. He said, *Nor, you're doing it right now.*

He bought me the cap for no reason. He saw it online. He said the children would like it. He was right.

On Thursday the fourteenth of August, 2025, on a hot evening, he made pasta with too much garlic, and we ate it on the back step because the kitchen was too hot, and then we went inside and he started on the dishes. I sat at the kitchen table with my glasses on, doing the next day's list on my phone, and I suppose I was humming, because he turned round from the sink with his hands dripping and said:

"You're humming again."

He was smiling.

Then he turned back to the sink. About ten seconds later, he made a small sound. Not a loud one. A surprised breath, the sound you make when you step off a curb you didn't know was there. A plate

went into the water. And he sat down on the kitchen floor in a way that nobody sits down on purpose, and then he lay down, and his eyes were open, and he wasn't there.

15.

I was on the floor beside him before I'd decided to move. Two fingers on his neck. Nothing. He took one big, slow, snoring breath, and my heart jumped, and then my training said *no*. That isn't breathing. It's what the body does when the heart has stopped and the brain is running out of air. It fools everybody. It doesn't fool an anaesthetist.

I called 911, put the phone on the floor on speaker, said the address, said *cardiac arrest, I'm a doctor, starting compressions*, and didn't wait for an answer.

I put the heel of my hand on the middle of his chest and pushed. Hard and fast, two inches down. On about the twentieth push I felt something crack under my hand. A rib. You have to push that hard. I kept going.

And I counted. Out loud. *One, two, three, four.* Thirty pushes, then two breaths into his mouth. Then thirty more. His mouth tasted of garlic.

Eleven minutes, until the paramedics came. I know it was eleven because I looked at the clock on the oven when I knelt down, and again when the first boots came into the kitchen. I pushed on my husband's chest about twelve hundred times, and I counted every one of them out loud, and when my voice went I counted in a whisper.

The paramedics shocked him four times. On the fourth, his heart came back.

Twenty-two minutes after he sat down on the floor. That's the number. Twenty-two minutes without blood to the brain. I knew what it meant in the ambulance. I knew it holding his hand, looking at his pupils in the light from the roof. I knew it, and I let myself not know it, for three more days.

16.

He was in intensive care for four days. I slept in the chair beside him. I read his scans myself; I'm not supposed to, but the young doctor was too frightened of me to turn the screen away. A healthy brain on a scan looks like a map: folds and grooves, clear lines between the grey and the white, like coastlines. Sam's looked like a map left out in the rain. All the lines had run together.

On the fourth day, the Monday, two doctors who weren't his doctors did the formal tests, the ones that have to be done the same way every time. Light in the eyes. A cotton bud on the eye. Ice water in the ears. The breathing machine turned off for ten minutes to see if he would try to breathe on his own.

He didn't. He was dead. His heart was beating, and his chest was going up and down because a machine was pushing it, and his skin was warm, and he had been dead, in every way that the law and medicine count, since some time in the night. Maybe since the kitchen floor.

A woman came from the donor organisation, kind and careful. She asked if I knew Sam's wishes. I did. He had the little pink dot on his driving licence. He'd said, at more than one dinner party, *Take whatever works. Take the lot. I won't be using it.*

So I said yes.

His heart was strong, she said. It had stopped because of a fault in its wiring, not because the muscle was bad. A musician's heart. A man who walked everywhere. There was a good chance it could be used. They would take it out early the next morning, at three o'clock, when an operating room was free.

17.

I had one more evening with him. Alone.

The nurses dimmed the lights and drew the curtain round the bed. The machine breathed for him, a soft hiss and a click, eighteen times a minute. I counted it without meaning to. The monitor showed his heart going along at a steady eighty-two. A good rhythm. A beautiful rhythm. It was the best-behaved that heart had

ever been, now that there was nobody left in there for it to behave for.

I pulled the chair right up to the bed and held his hand. It was warm. Someone had washed his hair, and someone had shaved him, badly, and there was a small cut under his jaw. His wedding ring was in a plastic bag in my pocket, with his watch. They take them off, for the operation. I had taken them off myself, so nobody else would have to.

I didn't know what to say to him. I had spent four days talking in numbers. Pressures. Temperatures. Minutes. I had no words left. I opened my mouth and nothing came.

So I did a thing I had never once done in twenty-four years of marriage.

I sang to him.

I sang the river song. I put my mouth close to his ear, the way I do with the children when I'm calling them back, and I sang it in my terrible voice, the one that can't hold a note. Very quietly. Slowly. The way he sang it, with his hands in the sink.

Oh Shenandoah, I long to hear you, Away, you rolling river. Oh Shenandoah, I long to hear you, Away, I'm bound away, 'Cross the wide Missouri.

I got the tune wrong. I went flat on the high bit, the *long to hear you*, the way I always would have, if I'd ever sung it. On *away, you rolling river* I did the stupid little trumpet noise with my mouth, the way he always did, *ba-da-baa*, and I laughed. Out loud, in the dark. And then I wasn't laughing.

And then I ran out of words.

That was the only verse I knew. Twenty-four years of hearing it over the sink, and I had never once listened past the first verse. I had always been doing something else. Reading the list. Counting.

So I did the only other thing I know how to do with my voice.

I counted him down.

Every day of my working life, I bend over a child on a table and say, *count backwards from ten for me*. And they count, and I count with them, softly, and somewhere around six their eyes close and they

go. I have said those numbers twenty thousand times. They're the only song I've ever really sung.

I sang them to Sam. To the river tune, because it was the only tune I had. I didn't plan the words. They came out the way the numbers come out at work, one after another, each one a little quieter than the last.

Ten for the plates still asleep in the rack, Nine for your coat on the hook at the back, Eight for the garlic still warm on your mouth, Seven, the floor where the music ran out.

Away, you rolling river, I'll count you down, but I won't let go.

Six for the rib that I broke with my hands, Five for the clock on the oven that stands Still at the minute you sat on the floor, Four for the days in the chair by the door.

Away, you rolling river, I'll count you down, but I won't let go.

Here's where the little ones always go under. Here's where they close their eyes and wonder. Here's where I say their name, nice and clear, And they open their eyes, and I'm still here.

Away, you rolling river, I called them back. I called them every time.

Three for the light that they shone in your eyes, Two for my hand, and the way your hand lies, And one —

I stopped.

I couldn't sing it. I'd got all the way there, right up to the edge, and I took a breath to say it, the last one, the real one, the one that lets them go, and it wouldn't come out.

Because I know what *one* means. *One* is where they go. When the child on the table gets to one, or I do, counting for them after they've stopped, that's the moment they're under. That's the moment they leave. Every day of my life I've said *one* without thinking, because I've always known I could say their name afterwards and bring them back.

I couldn't bring him back. If I said *one*, he would go, and I couldn't call him up again.

So I didn’t say it. I sat there with the word in my mouth like a stone, and the machine breathed, and the river song ran out at two.

So I put my forehead down on his chest. On the place where I had cracked his rib on the kitchen floor. Under my forehead his heart was going, eighty-two, strong and slow, as if nothing had happened. And I said, into his hospital gown, so quietly I could hardly hear it myself:

I’m sorry about your rib.

Nobody heard. The curtain was closed. The nurses were at their desk at the other end of the unit. The man in the next bed was in a coma. The machine breathed. The heart beat eighty-two.

I sat like that until my neck hurt. I think I fell asleep for a few minutes. When I lifted my head, there was a damp patch on his gown where my face had been.

That was all. It was the most private thing I have ever done in my life. I have never told anyone. Not his sister. Not the counsellor the hospital paid for. Not Ruth. Nobody. I didn’t even know those words until I sang them. They didn’t exist before that night, and nobody heard them but a dead man and a breathing machine.

At ten o’clock I went home. At three in the morning I was lying on his side of the bed with my clothes on, and I knew exactly what was happening across the city, because I’ve stood in that room. The lights. The cold. The cooler on its trolley by the door. I counted the minutes. *Now. Now it’s out. Now it’s in the ice. Now it’s in the car.*

Away, it’s bound away.

Six weeks later a letter came on cream paper, and told me, gently, in general terms, where the pieces of my husband had gone. His kidneys to two adults. His liver to a woman in her fifties. His corneas to two people who could see again.

And his heart, it said, to *a twelve-year-old boy in Southern California, who is doing well.*

I put the letter in the kitchen drawer with the takeaway menus and the spare batteries, and I closed the drawer, and I didn’t open it again.

18.

The biopsy took nineteen minutes. I watched every one of them on the clock. I gave him nothing more. He didn't need it. His numbers were perfect the whole way through. Ninety-four, ninety-two, ninety-four. A strong, steady, beautiful rhythm.

When it was done, we wheeled him through to recovery, and Ruth took over his chart, and I stood at the head of the bed, as I always do, and said his name.

"Sorush. Sorush, sweetheart. Time to come home."

His eyes were already open. They had been open the whole time. Slowly the flicking slowed down, and stopped, and they came back from wherever they had been looking, and found the ceiling, and then the cap, and then my face.

He looked at me for a long time. Calmly. Not swimming. Not confused. The way he had looked at me in the pre-op room, over the library book.

Then he spoke. Very softly, in his grave, unhurried, old man's voice.

"He says thank you for the song."

I didn't move.

"The one about the river," Sorush said. He frowned slightly, as if he was listening to someone a little way off. "He says you went flat on the high bit. He says that's all right."

He was quiet for a moment, listening.

"He says you counted him down," Sorush said. "From ten. Like you do with us." He frowned again, as if he was trying to get the words exactly right, the way you'd carry a full glass. "He says you stopped at two. You never got to one."

He was quiet for a moment.

"He says that's all right. He says he's waiting there. At two."

Ruth looked up from the chart.

"And he says," said Sorush, "don't be sorry about the rib."

Then he closed his eyes, and his breathing went long and slow, and he was asleep. Properly asleep. A twelve-year-old boy in a gown

with yellow ducks on it, with a long pale scar at his neck, and his mouth a little open.

On the monitor, my husband's heart went along at ninety-two.

19.

I said to Ruth, "Can you watch him?" in a voice that sounded normal.

She looked at me for a second too long. Then she said, "Sure, hon."

I walked out of recovery and along the corridor and into the staff toilet at the end, the one with the broken lock that you have to hold shut with your foot. I held it shut with my foot. I sat on the closed lid of the toilet in my lead apron and my moon cap, and I put my face in my hands.

I didn't cry. I want to be honest. I'd like to tell you I cried. I didn't. I sat there and my whole body shook, very fast, like a dog in a thunderstorm, and I couldn't make it stop, and I did what I always do. I counted.

I counted the explanations.

One. Children say strange things coming out of anaesthesia. They dream, and they tell you the dream. I've heard a thousand of them. Giraffes. Big rooms. People waiting.

But not a song about a river. Not *the high bit*. Not a rib. Not a song that did not exist until I made it up, in the dark, behind a curtain, fourteen months ago, and sang once, to a dead man, and stopped at two.

Two. Somebody told him. Somebody heard me, that night, and told someone, who told someone. Hospitals are full of gossip.

But nobody heard me. The curtain was closed. I've never said a word about it, to anybody, ever. And he's twelve. He's never been near that intensive care unit in his life.

Three. I'm wrong about the heart. It's not Sam's. There are dozens of transplants. The date is a coincidence, and the song is a coincidence, and the rib is a coincidence.

Three coincidences, one on top of the other. I'm a scientist. I know what the odds of that are. I know that when three coincidences line

up, you stop calling them coincidences and you start calling them a finding.

Four.

There wasn't a four.

I sat there for a long time, holding the door shut with my foot. Someone tried the handle and went away. The shaking slowed down, and stopped.

And then a thought came up, very quietly, from somewhere underneath all the others, the way a child's voice comes up from under the anaesthetic:

Where was he?

Not *what was he dreaming*. Not *what was his brain doing*. I knew what his brain was doing. I'd given it the drug that did it.

Where was he, for nineteen minutes, with his eyes open, staring at nothing?

And who was he talking to?

20.

That evening, at home, I opened the kitchen drawer for the first time in a year, and took out the letter on cream paper, and read it standing at the counter.

A twelve-year-old boy in Southern California, who is doing well.

The rules are very clear. I know them. I've explained them to families myself. The donor's family and the recipient's family are never told each other's names. You can write a letter, without your name or address, and the donor organisation will pass it on. If, after a year, both sides want to, they can agree to meet. Most never do. You do not, ever, go looking. A doctor who used her hospital's records to find out who had her husband's heart would lose her job, and her licence, and she would deserve to.

I knew all that.

I stood at the counter with the letter in one hand and my phone in the other, and I thought about the hospital's records. I have a password. I use it fifty times a day. I could open Sorush's file from my kitchen, now, and look at the transplant notes, and the donor's

details would be in there, a number, an age, a hospital, a cause of death. *Male, 54. Cardiac arrest. Silver Lake.*

I didn't open it. I want that on the record. Not that night.

Instead, I did something worse.

I thought about Lily, six years old, waking up after the freeway. *There's a big room. With lots of people waiting.* I thought about the girl from the pool, whose heart came back without her. I thought about twenty thousand children, coming up out of the dark with their eyes swimming, asking me, *where was I?*, and twenty thousand times I had said: *you were asleep.*

And I thought about Sorush, twelve years old, who had been put under thirty-two times, and who had said to me, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world: *Sometimes it's nice where you are. You have to decide to come back anyway.*

He'd been somewhere. All of them had been somewhere. I'd been sending them there for twenty-six years, with a smile and a cap with moons on it, and I had never once gone to look.

Sam was there. Or something that knew what Sam knew was there. In the big room, with all the people waiting.

And I knew exactly how to get in.

I put the letter back in the drawer. I closed it. I stood in my kitchen, on my new white tiles, in the place where he'd sat down on the floor.

And I started, for the first time in my life, to think like a criminal.

FROM THE CEILING

The Woman Above the Table

Phoenix, Arizona, 1991

Pam Reynolds was thirty-five years old. She was a singer and songwriter from Atlanta, Georgia. In 1991 she began to feel very ill, and the doctors went looking for the reason.

The doctors found a bubble in a blood vessel deep at the base of her brain. A balloon in the wall of an artery, swollen and thin, like the weak spot in an old tyre. It was large, and it was in a place where nobody could reach it safely. If it burst, she would die.

There was one surgeon, in Phoenix, Arizona, who said he could try. But to do it, he said, he would have to do something that sounds impossible.

He would have to stop her.

Not put her to sleep. Stop her. He would cool her body down, with machines, until it was colder than a refrigerator. He would stop her heart. He would stop her breathing. And then he would drain the blood out of her head, so the bubble went soft and empty and he could tie it off. For a while, by every measure doctors have, she would be dead. Her brain would make no electrical signals at all. Then they would warm her up, and put the blood back, and start her heart, and hope.

She said yes. There wasn't another choice.

On the day of the operation, they put her to sleep. They taped her eyes shut, so they wouldn't dry out. They put small speakers in her ears that made a loud clicking sound, over and over, so the doctors could check, from her brain's response to the clicks, how deep she was. Then they started.

Later, when it was over and she could talk again, Pam Reynolds told them what she remembered.

She said she heard a sound. A strange, buzzing sound, like a musical note. She said it pulled her. Out of the top of her head.

And then she was looking down.

She was above the operating table, somewhere near the surgeon's shoulder. She could see everything, clearer than she had ever seen anything in her life. She saw her own body lying there, covered in sheets. She saw the surgeon. She saw, in his hand, the small saw he was using to open her skull, and she thought it looked like an electric toothbrush. She saw the box it came out of, with its parts in it, like a socket set in a garage.

She said she heard a woman's voice, near her legs, saying that her blood vessels were too small on one side. They had to use the other.

She was right about the saw. She was right about the voice.

Then, she said, she felt herself pulled away again. Down a kind of tunnel. Towards a light. And at the end of the light there were people. Her grandmother, who had died. An uncle. Others. They were glad to see her. They told her she couldn't go any further. They told her she had to go back.

She didn't want to. It was beautiful, where she was. She said going back into her body felt like diving into a pool of ice water.

And then she was in the recovery room, with a tube in her throat, and her eyes swimming.

Here is the hard part. Doctors have argued about her story ever since.

Some say she was the proof of something. That she saw and heard things, true things, at a time when her brain was cold and empty and could not have seen or heard anything at all. That some part of her left the table, and looked down, and came back.

Others, including a doctor whose own job is putting people to sleep, say no. The saw and the voice came early in the operation, they say, long before her heart was stopped. She was asleep, but not deeply enough. It happens, very rarely: a person under an anaesthetic hears things, and feels things, and can't move or speak. Her brain, frightened and half-awake, put the sounds into a picture, and the picture became a woman floating near the ceiling.

Both sides have read the same pages. Both sides are sure.

Pam Reynolds lived for nineteen more years. She went on writing songs. She died in 2010, of heart failure, at the age of fifty-three.

She never changed her story. She was above the table. She watched them work on her. And then someone she loved told her it wasn’t her time, and sent her home.

III. THE WAITING ROOM

21.

I am not going to tell you how I did it.

I know how. Knowing how is my job. I have spent twenty-six years learning the exact doors into a person and the exact ways to close them, and there is nothing a person can do with that knowledge that I could not, in the dark, with my eyes shut. That is the part of this that frightens me most, now, looking back. Not that I wanted it. That it was so easy. That the knowledge was already in my hands, where the hospital had put it, and trusted me with it, because I was the careful one. I was always the careful one.

So I will leave the how in the dark where it belongs, and tell you only this. There came a night, in the third week of October, when I had what I needed, and I was alone in my house, and I had made myself as safe as a person can be who is doing an unsafe thing on purpose, which is to say not safe at all. I lay down on my bed, on my side, the way we are taught, with a towel under my face and a bowl on the floor, the small animal precautions of a woman who has spent her life keeping other people from dying by accident and meant, that night, only to visit the place where her husband had gone, and come back up, the way she had come up twenty thousand children.

I want to be honest about one thing before I go in. I told myself it was research. I told myself it was grief. Both of those were true. But underneath them was a third thing, smaller and colder, and it is the truest, and I didn't look at it directly until much later.

I wanted to see him. That was all. I would have done anything.

I said his name out loud, in the empty room. *Sam.* The way I say the children's names, to call them up. Except I had it backwards. I wasn't calling him up.

I was going down to him.

I started to count. Of course I did. *Ten. Nine.* My own voice, soft, in the dark, the way I do it for them. *Eight.* I got the little sideways tug behind the eyes, the one the children must feel and can't tell me about, the feeling of a hand on the back of your collar. *Seven.*

I did not get to six.

22.

The body goes first.

I knew it would. I have watched it go in other people ten thousand times, from the outside, the slackening of the jaw, the hand that stops gripping. I had never felt it from the inside. From the inside it is not like falling asleep. Falling asleep is a slow tide. This was a thing being taken off me, the way you take off a coat, sleeve by sleeve.

My feet went first. Not numb. Gone. Not that I couldn't feel them, but that there was nothing there to feel, and, strangely, no alarm about it, as if they had never been mine and I had only been borrowing them. Then my legs, up to the knee, the hip. My hands. I thought, with the last clear corner of the doctor in me, *this is what the children can't say. This is the thing they have no words for, because it happens on the way down, before the words switch off.* And then that corner went too, the doctor, the one making notes, and I stopped being able to think in sentences, and I stopped minding, and that was the frightening part, how much I did not mind.

The last of it to go was the weight. All my life I had been a weight pressing down on something: a bed, a chair, the floor of a kitchen. I had never once noticed it, the way you don't notice a sound until it stops. It stopped. I weighed nothing. I was not lying down any more because there was no down.

And the room, which I could still half-see, began to move.

The ceiling lifted. I don't know how else to say it. The walls, which had been close and ordinary, the walls of the bedroom where I had slept for twenty years, slid backwards and kept sliding, and got taller, so that the room I was in was no longer a room but a hall, and then a cathedral, and then something with no top to it at all. The light from the streetlamp outside, coming through the blind in thin bars, stretched out long and thin and far away, like the last light at the end of a very long day, and I understood, without words, that I was leaving. That the house was a thing I was moving away from. That I had already come a great distance from the bed, and the bowl, and the towel, and the woman lying on it, and that I could

not have found my way back to her now if I had wanted to, and I did not want to.

23.

Then I fell.

Everyone who has been there says this, and I had read it, the falling, and I had thought I understood it, and I understood nothing. It is not like falling in a dream, the jerk and the gasp. It is slow and it is total and it does not stop. I went down through the bed. I felt it, the exact moment of going through, not frightening, just a passing-through, the way light goes through water. Then down through the floor of the house. Then the ground under the house, and I had a brief, enormous sense of the city above me, all of it, the freeways and the reservoir and the hospital with its painted ceiling of stars, all of it receding upward and away, getting small, a bright crust on the top of the dark, and then that was gone too.

And the colour drained out of everything.

I want to be careful here, because this is the part that is hardest to say, and the easiest to say badly. It was not that it went dark. There was plenty of light. It was that the colour left, the way warmth leaves a body, and what was left was not black and not white but every grey there has ever been, a world made entirely of the greys of an old photograph, of X-rays, of the scans I had spent my life reading. And I thought, or something that used to be me thought, with no fear, with something almost like recognition: *oh. I know this grey. This is the grey of the pictures. This is the colour of the inside of people.*

I was going down through the inside of the world the way I had spent my life looking down through the inside of children, and it was all one grey, and it was beautiful, and it went on forever.

24.

And then I was not falling, because there was no I to fall, and no down to fall through.

This is the part I cannot give you properly. I have tried. I have sat with a pen and tried to write it for the woman I used to be, the careful one, and every sentence I write has an *I* at the front of it,

and that is the lie, because the thing about where I went is that there was no *I* there. The *I* was the last coat. It came off like the others.

Nora went. The name went. I could not have told you my name; there was no me to have a name. Fifty-two years went, the whole weight of a life, medical school and the wedding and the eleven weeks and the dog and the kitchen floor, all of it, not forgotten but *gone*, as if it had belonged to someone I had heard about once. I did not know I was a woman. I did not know I was a person. I did not know I was alive, or had ever been, or that there was such a thing as being alive.

What was left was very small and very simple. There was a point. A single point, with no size, that was looking. And a vastness that it was looking at. And nothing in between, no body, no name, no edge where the looking stopped and the vastness began. Just the looking, and the thing looked at, and both of them going on with no bottom and no end.

And the thing looked at was enormous.

I don't have the words and I am not going to pretend to. People reach for machines, or cities, or cathedrals, or honeycombs, and they are all wrong, because all of those are things with edges, and this had no edges. The nearest I can come is to say that it was *structure*. Vast, patient, grey structure, going up and out in every direction, far too big and too old to have been made by anything, holding itself together in a way that I, the point, the looking, somehow knew was the way everything is really held together, under the thin coloured skin of the daytime world. I was behind the scenery. I was in the room behind the room. And the thing I understood, the one clear thing, the thing that came off the structure like cold comes off ice, was this:

This is what is always here. This is here right now, under your kitchen, under your hands, under the children on the table. You were never anywhere else. You just had a coat on.

25.

And then I knew that I was dead.

I need you to understand that it was not a fear. Fear is a thing a body does, and I had no body. It was not a thought, either, not a *maybe* turned over and examined. It was a fact, flat and plain and total, the plainest fact there has ever been. I was dead. I had died. This was what death was, and it was not an ending, which is the thing nobody tells you and the thing I can least forgive: it was not an ending. It went on. I was dead, and I was still here, the point, the looking, and it would be like this always, and *always* was not a long time, because there was no time, there was just this, the grey structure and the looking and the knowing, forever, which is a word I had used all my life and never once meant until that moment.

A long time passed. Or no time passed. Both of those are true and neither of them means anything. People say, afterwards, *it felt like a hundred years*, and they are not exaggerating and they are not quite right either. There was no clock, and there was no me to be bored or patient or afraid, so the hundred years and the four minutes my phone would later show me are the same thing, seen from two sides of a wall.

And somewhere in that no-time, in that forever, the point that was looking understood one more thing, and this is the thing I came back for, this is the thing that changed everything, and I have to be careful to say it exactly.

I was not alone.

The vastness was not empty. I had thought it was empty. It was not. It was full. It was full the way a dark room is full when you come in from the sun and can’t see yet but you know, you can feel, that there are people in it, waiting, quiet, turned toward you. The structure was not a machine. It was a room. And the room was full of the others, all of them, everyone, the point understood, everyone who had ever had a coat and taken it off, all here, all waiting, patient as the grey, and that there was no edge between them and me because there was no me, we were the same looking, the same point, turned a different way, and that one of them, one of them in all that patient fullness —

— and here the words fail completely, and I will not insult it by pretending —

one of them was singing.

Not with a voice. There were no voices. But there was, running through the whole grey structure, under everything, the way the brainstem runs down into the dark under all the bright folds of the brain, a single line, a thread, a thing being carried, and it was a tune, and I knew the tune, I knew it the way the point knew everything, without a name, without a memory, and it was going down, step by step, down and down, *ten, nine, eight*, a counting, a river of counting, running down toward one, toward a single held note at the bottom of everything that it had not yet reached —

— and the point that was looking, the nothing that was me, turned toward it. Began to move toward it. Began to go down the thread toward the held note at the bottom, toward the one, the way water goes down.

And my phone went off.

26.

I want to tell you what coming back is like, because nobody told me, and because it is the part that I think, in the end, is the whole of it.

It is not like waking. Waking is gentle. This was not gentle. The alarm did not wake me; nothing could have woken the point, the point did not have ears. What the alarm did was further down and worse. It reached into the grey, into the forever, and it began, horribly, to build a person around the looking. To pour a person back into the point like concrete into a mould. First the fact of time, which came back like a wall coming down, the unbearable news that there was such a thing as *next*. Then a body, assembled around me in the dark, heavy, wet, aching, a thing of weight and edges and a mouth full of the taste of the inside of a mouth. Then, last and worst, the name. *Nora.* It came back and clamped down over the whole open endless thing like a lid on a jar, and I was a woman again, on a bed, in a house, in a city, in a life, and it was the single most violent thing that has ever happened to me, being made small again, being made *someone* again, being given back the coat and all its pockets full of everything I would have to carry back up the stairs into the daylight.

I was sick into the bowl. I had got the bowl right. One thing I had got right.

I lay there for a long time while the room put its colours back on, one by one, the way a bruise comes up but in reverse, and the ceiling came down to where ceilings go, and the streetlight was just a streetlight through a blind, and I was a fifty-two-year-old woman lying in her clothes on the wrong side of the bed with sick on her chin and tears running sideways across the bridge of her nose into the towel, and I was crying, finally, properly, for the first time in fourteen months, not because it had been terrible.

Because I'd had to come back.

Because I had been in the room, the full room, the waiting room, and he had been in it, under everything, carrying the tune down toward the one, and the alarm I had set to keep me safe, the careful alarm, the alarm a careful woman sets, had pulled me out of it one step before I reached him.

I had stopped at two again. I had come up at two. I had been two numbers from him and the clock had called me home.

And I knew, lying there, before I had even stopped shaking, before I had wiped my own chin, I knew the thing that would take the next three months of my life and very nearly all of it. I knew it the way the point had known everything, flat and plain and total.

I was going back.

Next time I would not set the alarm so soon. Next time I would go further down. Next time I would reach the one.

FROM THE CEILING

The Bright World

California and Washington, the 1970s

This one is about a doctor and his wife, and it is the one I find hardest to tell, because of how it ends.

The wife was a writer. Her name was Marcia. She was a well-known teacher of yoga and of the old art of reading the stars, and she had spent her whole life looking for the thing behind the thing, the hidden room, the door in the wall of the ordinary day. She had tried many ways in. None of them had taken her as far as she wanted to go.

The husband was a doctor. His name was Howard, and his job was putting people to sleep for operations. He spent his working life at the head of the table, with the mask and the drip, sending strangers down into the dark and bringing them back, and he knew, the way people in that job know, that there was a particular medicine that did something stranger than sleep. A medicine that did not just switch the lights off. One that seemed to send the person somewhere.

He brought it home.

I want to be careful here, because they were not fools and they were not reckless, or they did not think they were. They believed they had found the door that Marcia had been looking for her whole life. They took the medicine together, in their own house, and they wrote down what happened, carefully, like explorers keeping a log. They felt they were going somewhere no one had properly mapped. They felt they were pioneers.

And at first it was everything she had hoped. She wrote about a place of enormous light. A bright world, she called it, brighter and realer than this one, where the small frightened self fell away and what was left was vast and calm and old. She wrote that she had found what she was looking for. She wrote that she was not going to stop until she had learned the whole of it.

That is the sentence that stays with me. *I am going to stay with it until it is tamed.*

You cannot tame it. That is the thing she did not know, or knew and could not believe, the way none of us can quite believe it until the day it is too late. It is not a horse. It does not get used to the saddle. It is a door, and a door does not care how many times you have walked through it; it opens onto the same enormous dark every single time, and the dark is patient, and the dark can wait.

One winter night, a year or so after the bright world first opened for her, Marcia walked out of her house, and did not come back.

They searched. Her husband searched. For a long time nobody knew what had happened, whether she had been taken, whether she had wandered, whether the door had opened one last time and not let her return. It was almost two years before they found her, in the woods near the house, what the woods had left. There was never a clear answer. There has never been one since.

I think about the two of them a great deal. The doctor at the head of the table, who spent his days sending people safely down and bringing them safely back, and who could not bring back the one person he loved. And the writer, who spent her whole life looking for the bright world, and found it, and could not stop going, and in the end stayed.

I think about them because of the shape of it. A person at the head of the table, with the key in their hand, the key the rest of us are not trusted with. You would think that would make them safe. The key, the training, the knowing-how. You would think the ones who understand the door best would be the last to be lost through it.

It is the other way round. It is always the other way round. The ones with the key are the ones who go.

IV. WHO PUTS YOU UNDER

27.

Addiction is a word people use for other people. I had used it that way my whole life. The man on the floor of the locked toilet with the needle in his arm was a cautionary tale, a slide in a lecture, a thing that happened to the weak ones, the sad ones, the ones who couldn't cope. I coped. I was the one who coped. People said it about me like a compliment. *Nora copes.*

So I am not going to use the word about myself. Not because it isn't true. Because it's too small. People think addiction is about wanting something nice so much you can't stop. It isn't. It's about finding the one door in the whole grey wall of your life that opens, and then not being able to walk past it. Anybody would go through. Anybody who had found it. I want you to understand that. You would have gone through too.

Through November, I went back three more times.

I am not going to walk you through them. They were not pleasant, and I am not writing a guidebook, and anyway they begin to run together in my memory the way the trauma cases do, one long grey corridor with doors off it. But I will tell you the shape of what happened, because the shape is the thing, and the shape is this: each time I set the alarm a little later, and each time I went a little further down, and each time I came back I had lost a little more of the thing that makes a person careful.

The first night I told you about. I stopped at two.

The second time I reached the room, the full room, and I stayed in it longer, and the tune was there, the thread running under everything, going down, and I followed it further than before and felt the held note at the bottom get closer, close enough that I almost, almost — and then the second alarm, the safe one, the ninety-minute one, and up I came, retching, grieving, furious at the clock.

The third time I turned the second alarm off before I started.

I want that on the record too. I turned off the thing that was supposed to save me, deliberately, with my thumb, because it had got between me and him. A careful woman built that alarm into the plan. A careful woman set two of them. By the third time the careful

woman was mostly gone, worn away, the way the sea takes a cliff, grain by grain, and nobody standing on the top of it in the daylight can see it going.

28.

Here is how it looked from the daylight. From the hospital. From the side of other people.

I was better at work, if anything. That is the terrible joke of it, the one nobody believes. I was calm. I was precise. My hands were steady, steadier than they had been in a year, because the thing that had been screaming under everything since the kitchen floor had finally been given a place to go, three nights a week, and in between it was quiet, and a quiet anaesthetist is a good anaesthetist. The surgeons loved me. I was never late. My paperwork was perfect. My wastes were witnessed. My cases went well.

This is what the lectures never tell you, and should. For a while, a long while, longer than you would think, it works. That is the whole horror of it. If it didn't work, nobody would do it twice.

I lost weight, which at fifty-two everyone tells you looks well. I was pale, which is Los Angeles, where everyone is pale under the tan or orange under it. I was tired in the mornings, the heavy kind, but I had been tired in the mornings for fourteen months and nobody had thought anything of it, because a widow is allowed to be tired.

Only Ruth looked at me twice.

Ruth is the recovery nurse, the one who was there when Sorush woke up, the one who's been at Holloway longer than me and has seen everything and seen it come round again. On a Tuesday near the end of November she caught my sleeve as I came out of a case, and she didn't let go, and she said, quietly, not unkindly:

"Nora. You're going down to the moon with them."

I laughed. I had got very good at laughing by then. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know what it means." She looked at my face the way I look at a monitor. "I've just never seen you watch them go the way you watch them now. You used to bring them up. Now you watch them

go down. Like you're seeing them off at a station." She let go of my sleeve. "You take care of yourself."

I said I would. I was very warm about it. I thanked her.

I went straight to the staff toilet with the broken lock and held the door shut with my foot and stood there with my heart going, not because I was caught, but because she was right, and I hadn't known it showed. I had started to envy the children. That was the truth Ruth had seen on my face. Every small body I sent down, I thought: *you lucky thing. You get to go. And somebody's going to call you back, which is the one part I can't manage.* I was jealous of six-year-olds. For going where my husband was.

That is a thing I can only write down now, from the far side, in the daylight, where it looks like a kind of madness. At the time it looked like love.

29.

And then the patients started to describe me.

Not to me. That's the thing. They described me to Ruth, in recovery, coming up, in the swimming minutes before they remember who they are. I only heard about it later, when Ruth put it together, and when Ruth put it together was the beginning of the end.

The first one I know of was a girl of nine, up from a routine scan on the moon water, who told Ruth, very seriously, that she'd been in "the big grey place where everyone waits," and that "the lady in the moon hat was there too, walking around, looking for somebody." Ruth wrote it on the chart, the way you do, *emergence phenomena*, and thought nothing of it, because children say they rode giraffes.

But then there was a boy. And then a woman having her shoulder fixed. And then another child. Over about two weeks, Ruth told me afterwards, four or five of my patients came up out of the moon water and, before they knew their own names, said some version of the same thing. A grey place. A lot of people, waiting. And a woman walking among them in a cap with moons on it, going from one to the next, looking into their faces, not finding the one she wanted.

Looking for somebody.

I have thought about this more than I have thought about anything in my life, and I am a scientist, and I am going to give you the scientist's answer first, because it is almost certainly the true one and I would be a coward not to.

They had seen my hat. Of course they had. It is the last thing a child sees before they go under and the first thing they see coming up: my face, bent over them, and the moons. Of course a drugged brain, falling into the grey, building a dream out of whatever's lying around, would put the Moon Lady in it. Of course it would. A hundred children a month go under looking at that hat. The wonder is that they don't all dream it.

That is the answer. I believe that answer. I want you to hold onto that answer, because I am about to tell you that I did not believe it, not then, not for one second, and that the thing I believed instead is the thing that took the last of me.

I believed they had seen me. The real me. Down there. In the room. Walking among the waiting ones with my stupid cap on, going from face to face, looking for Sam, and not finding him, because every single time the alarm pulled me up before I reached the one. I believed that the children and I were going to the same place, and that I was becoming, down there, a thing the others could see: a woman in a moon hat who comes and goes and searches and never stops. A ghost. Before I was even dead. I believed I was haunting the waiting room.

And I thought: *if they can see me down there, then it's real. Then he's real. Then he's down there, in the full room, carrying the tune down toward the one, and all I have to do is get there before the clock.*

30.

I'm going to stop and tell you what it was. The moon water. You have a right to know, and Sorush had a right to know, and I never told him, and that is one of the things I will carry.

It is a medicine. A real one, a good one, one of the most useful medicines there is. It was made in a laboratory in the early 1960s, by a chemist working for a drug company, who was trying to build something that would put people to sleep for operations without the

danger of stopping their breathing. He succeeded. What he built is so safe, in that one way, that they give it to children, and to soldiers bleeding in the backs of helicopters, and in places with no electricity and no machines and no one to watch the breathing, because it is the one that lets you walk away from the bed for a minute and the person keeps breathing on their own. It has saved more lives than almost anything in my trade. It is on the list the world keeps of the medicines a country cannot do without.

The first people ever given it were volunteers in a prison, and when they came up they couldn't say where they'd been, and the doctors watching them had to invent a word for what they saw, because the old words didn't fit. The word they chose means *separated*. Pulled apart. The mind from the body.

Because that is what it does. At the small doses, the doses I give a child for a scan, it floats them off just far enough. At the doses I was giving myself, alone, in the dark, it cut the rope. It took the mind off the body the way you take a boat off its mooring, and let it drift out to where I have tried to tell you I drifted, the grey room, the waiting, the tune.

It has other names, the names the people who take it for fun have given it over the years, and the name the doctors use, which is long and cold. I had said that long cold name ten thousand times without once hearing it. I am not going to write the names here. Sorush never got to carry that weight and neither will you. They are only names. The thing itself does not care what you call it. It opens the same door every time.

There is one more thing you should know about it, and it is the thing I knew best of all and respected least, and it is the reason I can write this and the man on the floor of the toilet cannot.

It is very safe for your breathing and not safe at all for the rest of you. It does not stop your lungs, which is why we love it. But it stops you minding. It stops you minding about anything, including the bath you are lying in, or the sick coming up, or the clock, or the cold, or the fact that you have gone down past the place you meant to stop. The people it kills, it mostly kills that way: not by stopping the breath, but by stopping the care. They go down, and they don't mind, and the not-minding is the whole gift and the whole blade of

it, and by the time anything is wrong there is no one home who minds enough to come back.

I knew all of that. I had it by heart. I taught it. And it did not slow my hand by one half-second, because I had found the door, and he was on the other side of it, and you would have gone through too.

31.

On the first Saturday in December, I nearly didn't come back.

I had turned off the alarms. Both of them. I had stopped setting them the second time, and this time I didn't set the first one either, and I will not pretend to you that this was an accident or that I didn't understand what it meant. I understood exactly what it meant. I am an anaesthetist. Turning off the alarm, for me, is not like turning off an alarm. It is the specific, trained, professional act of removing the one thing that stands between a person and not waking up. I did it the way I have done ten thousand careful things, with steady hands, because this time I meant to go all the way down to the one, and I did not want the clock to call me home before I reached him.

I reached it.

I want to be careful here, because this is the centre of everything, and I have never told anyone, and I am not sure the words exist, but I owe it the attempt.

I went down the way I had gone before, the coat coming off sleeve by sleeve, the room climbing away, the fall, the colour draining out, the point, the vastness, the full grey room and the others waiting in it. And the tune was there, the thread, running under everything, going down, *ten, nine, eight*, and this time there was no clock, nothing to pull me, and I followed it. I let the point that was me pour down the thread the way water pours down, past seven, past six, down through the waiting ones, down and down toward the single held note at the bottom of the world, the one, where I knew, I knew the way the point knows everything, that he was.

And I got close enough to hear that it was him.

I can't tell you how. There were no voices. But a person's counting is as much theirs as their face, and the tune going down through

the grey was in his hand, I would have known it anywhere, the slow flat way of it, the little lift where the trumpet noise should go, and it was carrying the count down toward the one and holding the door of the one open, patient, the way he held every door, the way he would stand holding the screen door with his hip while I came in with the shopping, *in your own time, Nor, I've got it —*

— and I was almost there. One step from the one. One number. I had come all the way down past everything a person is, I had taken off the whole coat, I had turned off the clock, there was nothing left to pull me back, and he was right there, holding the door —

— and he wouldn't let me in.

I felt it. The door of the one, which had been open, which was always open, which every child I had ever sent down had gone through while I called them back from the lip of it — it closed. Gently. Firmly. The way you close a door on a child's room when they're finally asleep and you don't want to wake them. He closed it. From the inside. And the held note, the one, the bottom of everything, went quiet, and the tune stopped, and the thread I had been following down went slack in the grey, and the point that was me hung there in the full room with nothing left to follow and no clock to go home by and no coat to put back on and no way, I understood, with a horror that had no body to feel it with, no way at all to come back up on my own, because I had turned off the only thing that knew how.

He had shut me out. To save me. He had done the one thing that could send me back, which was to refuse to let me reach him, and in doing it he had left me with no road home, because I had burned the road home myself, on purpose, to get to him.

I don't remember coming up. There is nothing there. The scientist in me, the one who came back, has read what happens to a body in that state left alone, and knows that I should not have come up, that there was no reason and no mechanism for me to come up, that by every number I have ever trusted I should have stayed down. I did not stay down. Some time near morning I was on the bathroom floor, cold, with my cheek in a shallow inch of water and the plug chain against my mouth, breathing, because the medicine is kind to the breath even when it is kind to nothing else, and I was alive, and

I was alone, and the house was silent, and I knew two things with equal and total certainty.

He was down there. It was real. I had been one number away.

And he would never, ever let me reach him. Because he loved me. Because the whole of what he was, was a man who held doors so other people could get through, and the last door he had left, the only thing he had left to give me, was the one he could hold shut.

32.

I lay on the bathroom floor until the light came grey in the frosted window, and then blue, and then ordinary, and a bird started up in the lemon tree, and down in the street somebody's car wouldn't start, the same cough over and over, and the world put itself back together around me exactly as if nothing had happened, which is the thing about the world, it does not know and it does not stop.

And I did a sum. Lying on the floor, with the plug chain against my lip, I did the arithmetic I have done my whole life, the arithmetic that is the only prayer I know.

I was two numbers from him and he had shut the door.

He had shut the door because he loved me and wanted me to live.

If he wanted me to live, then the way to honour him was to live.

And if the way to honour him was to live, then I had to stop. I had to put the door between us and never go through it again, and carry the not-reaching-him up the stairs into the daylight and all the way through whatever was left of my life, the way I had carried the not-saving of the girl from the pool, the way you carry all of it, because carrying it is the job, carrying it is the whole of the job, and I had known that since I was a girl and forgotten it for three months in the dark.

That is the sum I did on the bathroom floor. It is a good sum. The numbers are right. I checked them.

I got up off the floor. I pulled the plug and watched the shallow inch of water turn and go down, and I thought, *away, you rolling river*, and I did not laugh.

I made coffee. I drank it standing up, on the new white tiles, in the kitchen, in the place where he sat down. I poured the rest of the moon water down the sink, all of it, the way I had wasted ten thousand doses in front of ten thousand witnesses, except there was no witness, there was only me, and I said it out loud, the way you have to, *witnessed*, and it was the loneliest word I have ever said.

Two days later, on the Tuesday, I went to work. I had a boy with a hernia and twin girls with ear tubes and, at eleven o'clock, in the heart catheter lab, a routine check on a transplant patient.

I looked at the name on the list.

Sorush Karimi. His next biopsy. The one the October results had asked for, sooner than usual.

And his mother had asked, the notes said, the office had passed it on, whether it could be the same doctor as last time. Because he had liked her. Because he had said she was the only one who didn't lie.

FROM THE CEILING

The Stranger’s Heart

New England, 1988

This last one is not about the medicine at all. It is about a heart.

There was a woman, a dancer, in New England, whose own heart and lungs were failing, and who was given, in an operation, the heart and lungs of a stranger. She did not know whose. That is the rule, and it is a good rule: the person who gives and the person who receives are kept from each other’s names, so that grief and gratitude do not have somewhere to go that they cannot come back from.

She lived. The operation worked. And then the strange thing began.

She started to want things she had never wanted. She, who had always eaten carefully, the way dancers do, found herself walking into a fast-food place and ordering fried chicken, which she had never liked, and wanting it badly, and eating it in the car. She craved green peppers. She said, out loud, to the surprise of everyone including herself, that she was dying for a beer, and she had never been a person who drank beer. Little things. Foolish things. But they were not hers. They had arrived with the operation, and she could not explain them, and they would not go away.

A long time afterwards, against the rules, by a mix of searching and chance, she learned whose heart and lungs she carried. A young man, eighteen years old, killed on a motorcycle. And when at last she met his family, carefully, nervously, two kinds of grief in one room, she learned that the boy had loved fried chicken, and green peppers, and beer. The small foolish things. The things that had arrived in her chest with his heart.

Now. I have to be fair to you, because this book has tried to be fair all the way through, and because I am a believer in neither direction, only a teller of what people have said.

The doctors say it is impossible. They are almost certainly right. A heart is a pump. It has no memories; memory lives in the brain, and

the brain stays with its owner and goes into the ground or the fire with them. A person who has been through an enormous operation, who has nearly died, who carries a stranger's organ in their chest and thinks about it every hour, will notice every small change in themselves and reach for a reason, and find one, because we are animals who cannot bear a thing without a reason. The chicken and the peppers and the beer, they say, are a story she told to make sense of a body that had been opened and closed and would never feel entirely her own again. That is the sensible answer, and the sensible answer is usually true.

And yet.

The families say otherwise. There are more of these stories than you would think. A child who names the donor she was never told of. A quiet man who wakes from the operation afraid of water, and learns his heart came from someone who drowned. People in grief, say the doctors, hearing what they need to hear. People telling the truth, say the families, that no one will listen to.

Both sides have read the same pages. Both sides are sure. I have told you that before, in this book, about a woman above an operating table, and I am telling you again, because it is the thing the whole series keeps arriving at: that there are experiences at the edge of a life which two careful, honest people can look at side by side and see two different worlds, and that no one has yet found the page that settles it.

I will only say this. Whatever the truth is, something of that eighteen-year-old boy went on living, warm, in the chest of a stranger, keeping her alive, beating while she slept. That much is not in doubt. That much is simply what a transplant is.

The rest you will have to decide for yourself, which is the whole of the point, and always was.

V. COMING UP

33.

I could have said no to the case.

I want you to understand that I thought about it. I stood in the changing room that Tuesday morning with the list in my hand and his name on it, *Sorush Karimi, 11:00, cath lab, biopsy*, and I thought: *refuse it. Swap it. Say you're not well. You poured it down the sink on Sunday, you've kept the promise two whole days, don't go near this one, this is the one that will take you.*

And then I thought about him sitting up in that bed with the library book, reading slowly, one finger at the edge of the page, and saying, *she's the only one who doesn't lie.* And his mother driving nights so she could be there in the days. And the office note: *patient has asked for Dr. Vance.*

So I didn't swap it. I told myself I was clean now, two days clean, and that I would do this one case properly, with clear eyes, in the daylight, and that it would be a kind of goodbye. I would stand at the head of the table and I would watch my husband's heart beat in a good boy, once, with nothing in my own blood but coffee, and I would say goodbye to it like a person, and then I would go to the meeting I had already looked up, in a church hall in Atwater, that evening at seven, and I would stand up and say the thing out loud, and give them my license if that was what it cost. I had decided all of that. I had decided it on the bathroom floor and I had held to it for forty-eight hours, which does not sound like much and was the hardest thing I have ever done.

I meant it. I want that on the record, because of what came after, and because nobody will ever quite believe it, including me, at four in the morning, still, now. I was clean. I had nothing in me. Whatever happened in that room happened to a sober woman with her hands where they were supposed to be.

That is the part I can't explain, and the part I have stopped trying to.

34.

He was quiet that morning. Not frightened. Quiet the way a lake is quiet. His mother kissed the top of his head and said the thing in Persian, *be brave, my soul*, and he said *always*, and they wheeled him into the cold room with the swinging white arms and the screens hung from the ceiling, and we lifted him over, and he was light, lighter than the last time, two months ago, I thought, though I told myself I was imagining it.

I put the stickers on his chest and the clip on his finger. The monitor started up. Ninety. A good strong rhythm, steady as a clock. Sam's heart, going along, keeping the boy alive, the way it had kept Sam alive for fifty-four years, the way it had kept going on the kitchen floor long after the rest of him stopped.

"Sorush," I said. "I'm going to give you the moon water now. Same as last time. You'll float up, have a look round, and I'll be right here to bring you home."

He looked up at me. Not at the cap. At my face. The way he had the first time.

"You've been sad," he said. Softly. Not a question.

"A little."

"You should let it go," he said. "Whatever you're holding. You're holding it too tight." He said it kindly, the way you'd tell someone their shoelace was undone. "It's heavy. You don't have to carry it the whole way."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I had a syringe in my hand and a job to do and a thing in my throat the size of a fist.

"Count for me," he said, and closed the sentence with the ghost of a smile, the mark out of ten. "I'll listen."

So I counted. *Ten. Nine. Eight.* And his eyes went glassy and still and began to flick, side to side, side to side, and his face went far away, to wherever it is they go, and his body went still as furniture, and I said, "He's away," and the cardiologist stepped in with the long thin tube and began to thread it down toward my husband's heart to take six small pieces of it, the way you'd take cuttings from a plant you were worried about.

And the heart went wrong.

35.

I knew the shape of it before the alarm. I always do. That is the thing twenty-six years gives you: you hear it half a beat before the machine. The rhythm stumbled, caught, stumbled again, and then it did the thing I had watched it do once before, on white kitchen tiles, with my hands on it: it stopped beating and began to shiver. A bag of worms. Pumping nothing.

The monitor screamed. The number fell off a cliff.

For one second, one whole second, I did not move. I have gone back to that second ten thousand times. In it I understood everything and nothing. I understood that this was the thing the biopsy exists to catch, the slow quiet turning of a body against the heart it was given, rejection, the oldest story in my trade, the body that cannot tell the difference between a gift and an invader and kills them both the same. I understood that Sam's heart, after its long borrowed year in a child's chest, had come to the end of the road. And I understood, in the same second, with a part of me I did not know I had, that it wanted to stop. That it had done its work. That it was tired.

Then the second ended and I was a doctor again and I did what I have trained half my life to do. I called the arrest. I put the board under him. And I climbed up over that small boy and put the heel of my hand on the middle of his chest, over the long pale scar, over my husband's heart, and I pushed.

Hard. Fast. Two inches down. On about the twentieth push I felt a rib go under my hand, a small green crack, and I did not stop, because you do not stop, and I counted. Out loud. The way I counted on the kitchen floor. *One, two, three, four.* My voice steady and far away, somebody else's voice. The room filled up around me, the crash trolley, the drugs, a second doctor, Ruth somehow, Ruth was there, Ruth had come running from recovery, and the shock pads, and the calm machine woman saying *shock advised*, and I was pressing on my husband's heart for the second time in my life, the same heart, the one I had cracked a rib over on a hot night in August, beating under my hands again, refusing again, and I was

counting, and somewhere under the counting, under everything, the floor of the world went thin.

36.

I need to tell this part exactly, and I can't, and I am going to anyway, because it is the only part that matters and because I promised myself, on the bathroom floor, that if I ever got to write any of this down I would tell the truth about the thing in the middle, the thing I have no right to and cannot prove and would not believe from anyone else.

I was pressing on his chest. I was counting. And between one number and the next, the way you step between two stones in a river and for half a second you are over the water and touching neither, I went through.

I did not take anything. My hands were on the boy. My mouth was counting. There was nothing in my blood. I have told you that and I will go to my grave telling you that, and the only sense I have ever been able to make of it is the thing the medicine had already taught me and the thing the dying have always said: that the room is not somewhere you go. It is somewhere that is always there. It is under the kitchen and under the children on the table and under your own two hands, a quarter inch below the skin of the day, and the medicine does not build the door, it only unlocks it, and there are, it turns out, other keys. Grief is a key. A boy you love is a key. A husband's heart, failing under your hands for the second time, is a key that will open any door that has ever been locked.

I went up first.

That is what nobody tells you and what every one of them tells you: you go up. I was above the table. I was up near the screens that hang from the ceiling, up in the cold air under the lights, and I was looking down, and I could see everything, clearer than I have ever seen anything, clear the way the grey is clear. I saw the top of Ruth's head. I saw the cardiologist's hands. I saw the crash trolley with its drawers open and a syringe cap on the floor where someone had dropped it. I saw a small boy on a table with his chest bare and his eyes open and flicking at the ceiling, at me, not seeing me, and I saw a grey-haired woman in a cap printed with little white moons

crouched over him, pressing, pressing, her mouth moving, counting, and it took me a moment, a long floating moment, to understand that the woman was me. That I was up here, looking, and down there, working. That I was in two places, the way he had told me, the way the boy had always been, *I'm in two places at once*, and that one of the places was going to have to let the other one go.

And then the lights dimmed, or I stopped needing them, and I went down.

37.

I went down through the table and the boy and the floor of the cath lab and the basement under it, down through the foundations and the old riverbed the city is built on, down past the roots of everything, and the colour drained out as it always does, the warm unnecessary colour of the daytime world sliding off like water off oiled cloth, until there was only the grey, the endless patient grey of the inside of things, the grey of the scans, the grey of the pictures, the colour of what we really are under the thin bright coat of being alive.

And the room opened out around me, the full room, the waiting room, bigger than the sky, bigger than the word big, the vast grey structure going up and out forever, holding itself together in the old way, the real way, and it was full. It had always been full. Full the way a dark house is full when you come in from the sun, full of the quiet turned-toward presence of everyone who has ever taken off the coat, all of them, here, waiting, patient as stone.

But this time I was not a point. This time I had come down carrying something, the way you carry a candle into a dark church, and the something was him, the boy, Sorush, because we had come down together, his hand and mine, me pressing on his heart and him flickering at the ceiling, two travellers on the same road, and he was beside me in the grey, and he was not a patient and he was not twelve and he was not sick. He stood easy in the vastness the way you stand in your own kitchen. He was lit from inside, a little, the way the moon is lit. And he turned to me and he spoke, not with a voice, there are no voices, but I heard him the way you hear your own name, and he said:

You came. Good. He's been waiting. But we have to do this properly, and it has to be quick, because up there you're breaking my ribs. And he smiled, the small grave smile, the mark out of ten, even here, even now.

Where is he, I said, or didn't say, in the no-voice of that place.

Here, said the boy. *He's always been here. You keep coming to look for him and you keep going home before you find him. Do you know why?*

I didn't.

Because you won't say the number, said Sorush. *You stop at two. Every time. You've been stopping at two for fourteen months.* He was very gentle about it. *You never finished the count, Nora. On the night with the curtain. You sang him all the way down and you stopped at two, because you couldn't bear to say the one that lets them go, and he heard you stop. And he's been here ever since, at two, on the near bank, where you left him. Not across. Not home. Just there. At two. Waiting for you to finish.*

And I understood, in the grey, with no body to feel it with, the whole size of what I had done. I had thought my love was a rope I was throwing down to him. It was a hook. It was a hook in him, and I had kept it set, and every time I came down looking for him I drove it deeper, and he could not go on and he could not come back, and I had done to my husband, for fourteen months, with the whole strength of my grief, the one thing I had sworn across twenty thousand children never to do. I had held him under. I had held him at two and called it love.

38.

And you, I said to the boy. *What are you?*

He told me. In the grey, with the vastness waiting, he told me, and it is the thing I came back to say, and it is the thing you will not believe, and it is the truest thing in this book.

My name means the one who hears, he said. *My mother chose it before I was born, before anyone knew my heart was wrong. In the old country, a long time ago, before any of the things people fight about now, they believed there was one whose work it was to sit*

with the newly dead. For three nights he stays with them, so they aren't afraid. And on the fourth day he walks them to the bridge, and across it, to wherever they're going. He's the one who hears. He hears them when no one living can, and he carries them over.

He looked at me, the dark patient eyes, the old soul in the child.

I've been doing it since I was little, he said. *They put me under more times than I can count, and every time I came here, and every time there were people here who were frightened, who'd just arrived and didn't understand, and somebody has to sit with them. Somebody has to walk them across. I'm good at it. It's the one thing I was ever good at.* The smile, faint. *You get used to the idea that you'll probably die, I told you that. What I didn't tell you is what you get instead. You get this. You get to be the one who isn't afraid, so you can hold the hand of the ones who are.*

And Sam, I said. The grey roared and was silent. *You knew Sam.*

He taught me the river song, said the boy, and for the first time his voice, his no-voice, had something in it that was almost grief, almost a child's. *Every Christmas he brought his band to the hospital. Years. He'd come up to the long-term ward where they put the ones who weren't going home, and he'd play, and he was terrible on the trumpet and wonderful on the piano, and he taught us songs. He taught me Shenandoah. The rolling river. I used to ask for it. He said it was his grandmother's. He said his wife never came to hear him play because she was always working, always counting something, and that one day he'd bring her, and he never did.* The boy looked at me. *You never came.*

I never came, I said. In the grey. To the dead. *I was always working.*

And then my heart gave out, said Sorush, *and they called, and a heart had come, that summer, from a man in Silver Lake, and when I woke up with it I knew it. I knew whose it was before anyone told me, and they'd never have told me, it's against the rules, but I knew, because it knew the song. It hummed the song. Your husband's heart hums, did you know that? Three notes. Over and over. It does it in its sleep.* The smile, and under it something breaking. *And then a year went by, and they sent me for my check-up, and the doctor had a cap with moons on it, and her name was Vance, and I thought: there she is. The one who was always*

working. The one he wanted to bring. He sent me his heart and his song and I'm going to give them back to her, and then I'm going to take him across, because that's my job, and he's been so patient, he's been waiting at two for such a long time.

39.

The heart is stopping, said the boy, and in the grey I could feel it, the great tiredness of it, the long work ending. *You can keep it going a while. Up there. You know how. You can shock it and drug it and bring it back, and it'll beat a few more months in me, badly, and I'll be sick, and you'll have a piece of him in the world a little longer. You can do that. You've done it before.* He was not pleading. He was telling me the choice, plainly, the way I should have told twenty thousand children where they were going. *Or you can finish the count.*

If I finish the count you die, I said.

I was always going to die, said Sorush. *That was never the question. I worked that out when I was seven. The question was whether I'd do it afraid, holding on, with a woman breaking my ribs to keep a tired heart beating one more winter. Or whether I'd do it the way I've helped a hundred strangers do it. Not afraid. Walking someone home.* He held out his hand to me, in the grey, the small hand with the long fingers. *Let him go, Nora. Say the one. You'll be saying it for both of us. I don't mind. I'm the one who hears. I'll hear it, and I'll take him, and it'll be the best thing I ever did.*

And behind him, in the vastness, in the patient full grey, something moved. Someone. A shape I knew the way you know a shape in the dark of your own house, by the space it takes up, by the way the air leans toward it. He did not come close. I think he couldn't, or I couldn't, or the rules of that place don't allow the living and the held to touch. But he was there, my husband, at two, where I had left him, and he lifted one hand, the way he lifted it from the sink, *in your own time, Nor, I've got it*, and I understood that he had heard every word, that he had been hearing me for fourteen months, the counting, the coming down, the looking, and that the only thing he had ever wanted, the whole patient time, was for me to stop looking for him and let him go home.

40.

I came up for one breath. I need you to know it was the hardest thing. Coming up is always the hardest thing.

I was over the table, pressing, counting, and Ruth was beside me with the shock pads charged in her hands and her eyes on my face, waiting for the word, because in a code somebody has to be in charge and the person in charge was me, and she said, “Nora. Again? Do we go again?”

And the monitor showed the shivering line, the quiver, the heart that wanted to stop, and the clock on the wall said we had been at it eleven minutes, and everyone in that room was looking at me, the careful one, the best one, the one at the top of the list, to tell them whether to fight on or to stop, and they would have fought as long as I said fight, they would have fought till midnight, because that is what we do, we fight, we never let the heart go, we are the ones who bring them back.

I thought of the girl from the pool. I thought of how I had kept her body breathing for three days after the child had gone, because I could not say the word, because saying the word is the one thing we are never trained to do. I thought of Sam on the kitchen floor and the twenty-two minutes and how I had counted every push out loud because counting was the only prayer I knew. I thought of a boy saying *you have to decide to come back*, and *somebody has to walk them across*, and *you’re holding it too tight, you don’t have to carry it the whole way.*

And I stopped pressing.

I took my hands off my husband’s heart.

I stood up, over the small boy, in the cold bright room, and I did the thing I had never done in twenty-six years, the thing there is no training for, the thing that is the whole of the job and the part they never teach you. I called it. I let him go. My voice did not shake. It was the soft voice, the one I keep for the end, the one Sam said was the only time I ever went gentle.

And then, because somebody has to say the number, because the count was fourteen months unfinished and the door would not open till it was done, I counted him down, out loud, in front of all of them,

and they must have thought the grief had finally cracked me, a woman singing numbers over a dead boy, and I did not care, I counted him all the way down, through the song, through the river, through the plates and the coat and the garlic and the rib and the clock that stopped and the days in the chair, down and down, *three, two —*

and I said it.

One.

I said the one.

41.

And in the grey, below, I heard the song reach the bottom.

I had never heard it. Fourteen months, and I had always stopped one note short, and I had never heard what was at the bottom of the count, the held note, the one, the sound the children go into and I always pulled them back from the lip of. I heard it now. The boy took my husband's hand, the guide and the guided, the one who hears and the one who had waited, and they turned, together, and went down the last step, into the one, into the held note at the bottom of the world, and it opened for them the way I imagine a door opens when you have been outside in the cold your whole life and someone finally, finally lets you in, and the note was not an ending. I have to tell you that. It was not an ending. It was the most alive sound I have ever heard, a whole chord where I had always feared there was silence, the sound of being let in, and the last of it, the very last thing that came back up the thread to me before the grey closed over, was my husband, not his face, I never saw his face, just his hand, lifting, the trumpet noise, *ba-da-baa*, the joke, the stupid beautiful joke he made over the sink for twenty-four years, going away, away, you rolling river, away and home.

And the door closed. Gently. Firmly. From the inside. The way you close the door on a child's room when they are finally, finally asleep, and you do not want to wake them, and you stand in the hall for a moment with your hand flat on the wood, and then you go back down to your life.

I came up.

I was on the floor of the cath lab. They told me afterwards I had finished the code standing, called it, counted, and then simply sat down against the wall, under the screens, and closed my eyes, and that Ruth had thought for one terrible moment that she had two to deal with, and had come and put her fingers on my neck and found me there, breathing, with my eyes open, flicking, far away, and had said my name, over and over, *Nora, Nora, come back*, the way I say it to the children, until I came back.

The boy was gone. The time of death is on the record. I still say fourteen months, I will say it for the rest of my life, because fourteen months is the number the clock stopped at the night he died and it has never ticked on for me since; but the calendar is not kind, and the calendar says it was nearer sixteen, a year and a quarter and more, between the first time that heart stopped, on a kitchen floor, and the last time, in a cold bright room, under my hands, when I let it.

42.

His mother was in the family room. Parisa. The small woman in the delivery fleece, with her car keys still in her hand, because she had driven a night shift and come straight in, the way she always did, to be there in the day.

I told her myself. You are not supposed to; there are people whose job it is; I did it anyway, because he had asked for me, because I was the one who doesn't lie. I sat down next to her and I held her hand and I told her that his heart had rejected, that it had been coming for a while and we had not caught it in time, that we had fought and that it had not been enough, and that he had not been afraid. That last part I could say and know it was true, which is a mercy I have almost never had.

She did not make the sound. She was very quiet. She looked at the wall for a long time. And then she said, in her careful English:

"He knew. He told me, after the last one, the check-up, in the autumn. He came out of the sleep and he held my hand and he said, *Maman, I met the Moon Lady, and she is the one.* I said, the one what. He said, *the one he was waiting for. I can give him back now*." She turned and looked at me. "I thought it was the medicine

talking. They say strange things, the children, coming up. He rode a giraffe once.” A sound came out of her then, half a laugh, all grief. “I thought it was the medicine.”

“What did he mean,” I said. “The one he was waiting for.”

And she told me about the Christmas band. About the music teacher who came every year to the long ward, the terrible trumpet, the wonderful piano, the songs. About how Sorush, who had been in and out of that hospital his whole short life, had loved him, had asked for the river song every December, had cried the Christmas the teacher didn’t come, because the teacher had died that summer, and how, that same summer, a heart had come for her son, and how her son had woken up from the transplant humming a song she had never taught him, three notes, over and over, even in his sleep.

“He said the heart knew the song,” she said. “I thought it was a child’s fancy. The doctors said it was impossible. You are a doctor. You will say it is impossible.”

I am a doctor. I know it is impossible. I know that a heart has no memory, that memory lives in the brain, that a transplanted heart is a pump and nothing more, that a dying child’s brain starved of blood will reach into whatever is lying around and build a story out of it, a giraffe, a moon hat, a song it heard somewhere once and forgot. I know all the reasons. I have read all the pages. I could stand up in a lecture hall tomorrow and explain every single thing that happened in that room, the rejection, the arrhythmia, the vasovagal faint that put me on the floor, the oxygen-starved visions of a brain under strain, all of it, cleanly, in words other doctors would nod at.

And I know what I heard at the bottom of the count.

Both of those are true. I have stopped needing one of them to win. That is the only peace I have found, and I found it on the floor of that cath lab, and I am not going to give it up to be right.

“No,” I said to his mother. “I’m not going to say it’s impossible.”

43.

I gave them my license eight days later.

I went to the meeting in the church hall in Atwater, the Tuesday after, and I stood up and I said the thing out loud, all of it, the machine and the salt water and the witness who watched me pour away the wrong syringe, the nights, the alarms I turned off, the Sunday I nearly did not come back. And then I went, the next morning, to the people whose job it is to hear such things, and I told them too, in a beige room with a recording light on, and I put my license on the table between us, and I did not make them take it. I gave it.

They were kind, in the careful way. They said there were programs. They said that anaesthetists who come forward, who get treatment, who do the work, are sometimes allowed back, under supervision, after years. They said I did not have to decide today.

I decided today. I decided on a bathroom floor in December, with a plug chain against my mouth, and again on the floor of a cath lab with Ruth's fingers on my neck. I am not going back to the head of the table. Not because I would do it again; I don't think I would; the door is shut and I was the one who shut it. But because I stood over a child I loved and I made a choice no impaired doctor has the right to make, to stop, to let go, to say the one, and I will never be entirely sure, I will never be able to prove, even to myself, that it was his time I was serving and not my own longing to finally let my husband go. Maybe the heart could have come back. Maybe I could have dragged it into one more winter. Maybe I stopped because it was mercy and maybe I stopped because I was tired of holding him at two. I think it was mercy. I will think it was mercy until I die. But a woman who cannot be certain of the difference between mercy and her own grief does not belong at the head of the table, with the drugs in her hands and a child's whole life in the balance, and I knew it, and I gave them the license, and it was the first clean thing I had done in fourteen months.

The cost is the point. I want to be clear about that, for anyone who reads this and thinks it is a story about a woman who found peace. It is not free. I traded the only thing I was ever good at. I will be something else now, for whatever is left. That is the price of the door, and I paid it, and I would pay it again.

44.

I want to end in the kitchen, because that is where it started, and because of the last small thing, which is the thing I think about most, more than the grey, more than the bottom of the count, more than any of it.

The evening after I gave them the license, I went home to the little wooden house on the steep street, and I did not eat off a paper plate.

I took a real plate down from the cupboard, one of the twelve from the wedding list that had sat up there untouched for fourteen months, and I made myself an egg, and I ate it at the kitchen table, sitting down, in the chair, and then I carried the plate to the sink, and I turned on the water, and I washed it.

I stood at the sink, where he stood, with my hands in the warm water, and I did the thing I never did, not once, in twenty-four years, because I was always working, always counting, always somewhere else.

I sang.

I sang the whole song, in my terrible voice that cannot hold a note, the first verse that is really his grandmother's and all the verses that are mine, the plates and the coat and the rib and the clock, the little ones going under and coming up, all of it, and I did not stop at two. I went all the way down. I counted myself down to the bottom of it, *three, two, one*, and I sang the one, out loud, to the empty kitchen, to the new white tiles, to the window with its slice of reservoir going dark, and I did the trumpet noise, badly, *ba-da-baa*, and I laughed, and the kitchen was quiet, and nobody answered.

Nobody answered. That is the whole of it. That is the thing I have to live inside now. I let him go, and he went, and the house is quiet, and when I sing there is no one to turn round from the sink and say *you're humming again*. I wanted him back so badly I went down into the country of the dead to find him, four times, five, and the last and best thing I ever did for him was to stop, and say the number, and let the house be quiet.

The children used to ask me, on the way up, swimming, *where was I.* Twenty-six years, and I always told them the same lie, because I

did not know and I was afraid, and the lie was: *you were asleep, sweetheart. You were just asleep.*

I know the answer now. If a child ever asks me again, and one day, somewhere, one will, I will crouch down so my head is lower than theirs, and I will tell them the truth, because I am done lying, because a boy who heard everything taught me not to.

I will say: *you were somewhere very big, and very old, and not at all frightening. You were where we all go. And somebody there loved you so much that when it was time, they let go of your hand, and gave you back, and that is the hardest thing that love ever has to do.*

And then I will say the only other true thing I know.

Welcome home.
The End.

WHAT IT DID

Ketamine. **Made.** Built in a laboratory in the early 1960s, from a family of chemicals that came before it, by a chemist trying to make a safer way to put people to sleep for operations. It is not grown anywhere. Its home is the operating room. **Door:** leaving the body.

How it was taken in this book. At the hospital, in the ordinary way, it was given to children for short procedures: a small dose, into a drip or a muscle, enough to float them off for twenty minutes. At home, alone, the narrator gave herself far more, on her own, which is the thing this book is a warning about and does not describe.

How long. A small dose lasts ten to twenty minutes, and the person is themselves again within the hour. A large one takes the mind much further, for roughly the same short clock-time, though from the inside it can feel like a hundred years. The body comes back long before the self has finished coming back.

What it did to time. It broke it. Twenty minutes held what felt like a lifetime. Those who go deep come up unsure whether they were gone for a second or forever, and the word *forever* stops being a figure of speech.

What it did to the body. At the small doses, almost nothing: the breathing keeps on by itself, which is why the medicine is loved and why it is given where no machine can watch. The eyes stay open and still and flick from side to side; the face goes far away; the body lies as still as furniture. At the large doses the danger is not to the breath but to the care: it stops the person minding anything at all, including the water they are lying in, and that is mostly how it kills.

What it did to the self. It took the self off the body the way you take a boat off its mooring. The name went. The life went. What was left was a point of looking, and a vastness, and nothing in between.

What it did to the world. The body dissolved from the outside in. The room stretched and went far away. There was a falling, and the colour drained out until everything was the grey of old

photographs, and then a vast grey structure, and the certainty of being dead, and the understanding that it was not an ending. And, for the one who went furthest, the room was not empty. It was full.

What it meant. That there is a place the medicine opens that is very like the place dying opens, and that the people we have lost may, in some sense no instrument can read, still be there, waiting, and that wanting to reach them is the most dangerous wanting there is.

What it did not do. It did not bring anyone back. It could not. The one thing it will not give you is the thing you went down for.

On the strength scale made by the chemist Alexander Shulgin: *plus three*, the full effect, which nothing in the world can be done to ignore — and, at the doses this book warns against, past the top of any scale meant for the living.

THE MAPMAKER

For Edward Domino (1924–2021)

and for Calvin Stevens, who built the door

In the summer of 1964, in the biggest walled prison in the world, in a small town in Michigan called Jackson, a careful man sat and watched a volunteer in prison clothes go somewhere nobody had been before.

The man was Edward Domino, a pharmacologist from the University of Michigan, forty miles up the road in Ann Arbor. He was not an easy man to impress; he had spent years studying the drug's dangerous older cousin, and he knew how strange these chemicals could make a person. But he had never seen anything like what the new one did. The volunteers did not fall asleep. Their eyes stayed open. Their bodies went still as furniture. They could not answer, could not feel a pin, and yet they were not unconscious; they were plainly somewhere, looking at something that was not in the room. Domino, reaching for words, wrote that they were like zombies, with their eyes open, totally disconnected from their surroundings.

That was the problem he could not solve: what to call it. The men were not asleep and not awake and not unconscious. None of the old words fit, and a new medicine needs a word before it can be used. The story goes that he was describing it to his wife, Toni, one evening at home, saying the subjects seemed *cut off*, *disconnected*, their minds separated from their bodies, and that it was she who gave him the word. A word that means *separated*. *Pulled apart*. From it came the whole name of the class of medicines this book is about, the name still used in every hospital in the world: a *dissociative* anaesthetic.

Edward Domino spent the rest of a very long life on these drugs and their kin. He was on the Michigan faculty from 1953 and never really left it; he was still an active emeritus professor when he died, in November 2021, at the age of ninety-six. He lived to see the

medicine he had first watched take a prisoner out of his own body become, sixty years on, a treatment that pulls people up out of depressions nothing else could reach, and a thing sold in clinics, and a thing that kills, all at once, which is the fate of every door in this series.

This book is dedicated to him because he was the one at the head of that first table, who looked, and wrote down what he saw, and was honest that he did not understand it.

Calvin Stevens, who built the door

The medicine did not come out of the ground. Somebody made it. His name was Calvin Stevens, a professor of chemistry at Wayne State University in Detroit, who worked as a consultant for a drug company called Parke-Davis, and who, around 1962, building on a family of related compounds, made the one this book is about. It was known at first only by a number on a bottle. It had no name, and nobody yet knew what it did to a person. That it would turn out to open a door onto the country of the dead was not in anyone's plan. They were only trying to make a safer way to sleep.

The people around them

Guenter Corssen, the anaesthesiologist who gave the first human doses at Jackson Prison alongside Domino, and helped carry the medicine from the prison ward into the operating rooms of the world.

John Lilly (1915–2001), the brilliant and reckless scientist who, in the 1970s, took the medicine almost daily, floating in a tank of warm dark water, and came back with reports of contact with vast intelligences that ran the coincidences of the world. He is the warning the series keeps telling: that the ones who understand the door best are the ones most often lost through it.

Marcia Moore and Howard Alltounian, a writer and the anaesthesiologist she married, who took the medicine together and wrote a book about the bright world they found, and who believed it could be tamed. One winter night in 1979 Marcia Moore walked out of her house and did not come back; her remains were found in the

woods near it almost two years later, and no one has ever explained it.

The near-death researchers — among them Sam Parnia and Karl Jansen — who noticed that what people describe under this medicine and what people describe when their hearts have stopped are, in detail after detail, the same report, and who have spent careers trying, and so far failing, to find the page that settles whether that means anything.

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 To verify before build: Edward Domino’s exact birth year (1924 vs 1925); the Toni Domino attribution of the word *dissociative* (reported in the 2010 history, confirm against a second source); Calvin Stevens’s synthesis year (~1962) and the exact Parke-Davis compound numbering; John Lilly’s dates; the Marcia Moore disappearance date (winter 1979) and recovery of remains (~1981).

GLOSSARY

Agonal breath [AG-uh-nuhl] — The slow, gasping breath a body gives when the heart has already stopped and the brain is running out of air. It looks like breathing and is not; it fools everyone except those trained to know it.

Anaesthetist [uh-NEES-thuh-tist] — The doctor whose whole job is to send a patient safely under for an operation, keep them alive and at the right depth while it is done, and bring them back.

Biopsy [BY-op-see] — The taking of a tiny piece of living tissue to look at under a microscope. In a transplanted heart, a few pieces smaller than a grain of rice, taken through a vein, to check the body is not rejecting the new heart.

Chinvat [chin-VAHT] — In the old faith of Persia, the narrow bridge the soul must cross after death, where it is judged; the bridge the plate of this book draws, and the crossing the boy's name belongs to.

Dissociative [dis-OH-see-uh-tiv] — From a word meaning *separated*. The name, coined for the medicine in this book, for a drug that takes the mind off the body, as this book describes.

Ketamine [KET-uh-meen] — The medicine this book is about. A made chemical, first built around 1962, that puts people safely to sleep for operations at small doses and, at large ones, opens the door this book goes through.

Maman [mah-MAHN] — Persian (and French), *mother*; what Sorush calls Parisa.

Parisa [pah-REE-sah] — Persian, *like a fairy*. Sorush's mother, who drives nights so she can be with him in the days.

Rejection — When the body of a transplant patient turns against the new organ it was given and begins to destroy it, unable to tell a gift from an invader.

Shenandoah [shen-uhn-DOH-uh] — An old American river song, older than anyone knows, from the traders of the Missouri. A

man sings his goodbye across the water to the girl the river is carrying him away from. Sam's grandmother's song.

Sorush [soh-ROOSH] — A Persian name, from an older word meaning *the one who hears*. In the old faith of Persia, the one who stays with the newly dead for three nights, and on the fourth day walks them to the bridge, and across.

Sraosha [srah-OH-shah] — The older form of the name Sorush; the listener, the guide of souls, in the faith of ancient Persia.

Ventricular fibrillation [ven-TRIK-yuh-lur fib-ruh-LAY-shun] — When the heart stops beating and only shivers, a quivering bag that pumps no blood; what killed Sam on the kitchen floor, and what the boy's heart falls into on the table.

Los Angeles, now. Dr. Nora Vance has put twenty thousand people to sleep and brought every one of them back. It is the one thing she has never failed at.

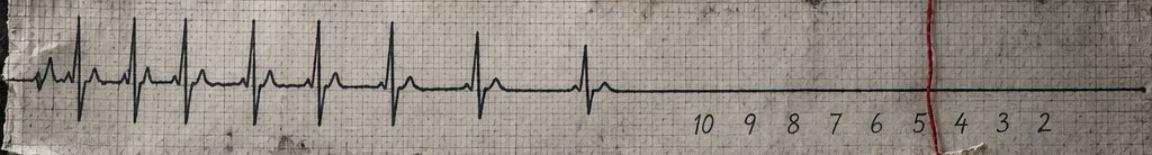
Then her husband dies on the kitchen floor, and his good heart is given to a boy she will never be allowed to meet, and the lie she has told frightened children for twenty-six years stops working. You *were asleep, sweetheart. You were just asleep.*

There is a medicine in her cabinet that does more than sleep. The ones who have taken it come back speaking of a vast grey room where everyone who has ever died is waiting, patient, together. Nora has spent her whole life sending children to the edge of that room and calling them home. She has never once gone in to look.

Now she goes looking. For the room. For him. And each time she goes a little further down, and each time it is a little harder to climb back up.

She knows exactly how to send a soul under. What she has never learned is what it costs to come back.

She could bring anyone back but the one she wanted. So she went down to find him.





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