



I am the recording angel, doomed to watch.

Never mind my sin. Here is my expiation and my reward: to orbit Jemma Claflin from her birth to her death, and fix my eyes always on her face the way better angels always look upon God's glory. I fell back to earth and back through time to the night of her birth, and, bound to her heart by chains of air and spirit, have never since been more than a few hundred feet from her body. Whenever I tried to flee—there was a whole world to rediscover and witness, after all, and all the curving ways of time lay open before me, and a billion anguished lives called out to me to come and watch them, instead of a toddler with peas on her cheek—the chains would pull tight, hooks in my flesh. In all my years of watching I have never hated her, but I have often been bored, and if there are doodles in the margins of her book, and gaps in her story, if I have looked away from her to watch my brothers and sisters at play among the stars and missed here or there an episode of her life, if I have watched her brother, always burning bright to me, even though I knew his story, past and future, already by heart, it is because I am neither a perfect angel nor a perfect witness. I put off perfection with my mortal form, and what a relief to do it.

Never mind, for now, the quotidian discoveries of her infancy; do not look at her yet toddling after her brother, or trudging, head down, through her education. Beauty pageants and swim meets and drugs smoked or snorted

under her brother's tutelage are not the place to start; neither are the flights with her father over the Chesapeake Bay, or the nights drunk-diving into the past with her mother, or the nights she skated over the frozen river to crawl into her lover's house and lie with him in his single bed. And look away from the funeral years; ignore the miracle her brother wrought. Consider her instead on the edge of her own greatness, separate from and grander than Calvin's. There she is on the night of the storm, attending a birth, waiting while the rain falls and the clouds are heaping and piling in the sky and I am sighing all around her, finally. Finally!



Jemma thought that witnessing a birth ought to make a person exactly the opposite of horny. The rush of blood and fluid; the bitter odors; the screaming of a mother arrived too late for an epidural; and worst of all, the hideous dilation, the vagina that permitted the entrance of hands and arms and instruments sized and shaped more appropriately for barbeque than surgery, and disgorged the bloody cantaloupe. They should freeze you up, but they never froze her up, and sometimes, like on the night of the great storm, they put the need in her. So she found herself distracted by thoughts of Rob Dickens even at the most challenging and complicated delivery of her third-year medical student career: a gruesome baby born to a gruesome mother. The child, the expression of a jumble of chromosomal additions and deletions so unique that she was her very own syndrome, was hideous—too long and too short, too wide and too thin, with things that were not eyes where her eyes ought to have been, and a cuttlefish mouth—but she seemed sweet to Jemma, who stood over her among the white-suited pediatricians, a fellow, a resident, and an intern. Her cry was more dulcet than any Jemma had ever heard, probably because she was half dead and lacked the energy to voice a truly irritating scream. “Rub,” Jemma’s senior resident said to her, because she was only blotting at the wet baby with her towel. The mother was lovely in her flesh but seemed deformed in her soul. She shouted curses at her child while the anesthesiologist, scowling, pushed white, milky propofol into her

veins, trying to shut her up. Not even her epithets and her screams cooled Jemma. Rob Dickens was not among the pediatricians in their bunny suits—one raised a laryngoscope with a flourish like a hoodlum clicking out a folding knife and then swooped in to intubate the now quiet and rather blue baby—but she knew where he was, waiting with the other students, residents, and staff for this unfortunately interesting case to arrive across the glass hall that connected the county hospital to the children’s hospital.

While she ought to have been calculating one-minute apgars for the child, she pictured Rob Dickens in his scrubs, his arms naked almost to the shoulder. When the resident asked her for the score she blushed and fumbled in her mind for the number, forgetting the categories—tone, cry, grimace, color, and what else? Not grace, not style, not symmetry, but these were what she thought of. The resident—a third-year named Natalie famous for the black cloud of acuity that hovered over her call nights—stared at Jemma coolly over her surgical mask, and Jemma remembered to count the heartbeat. She reached out to pinch the umbilicus and feel the pulse, much slower than her own, which always raced when she was mortified by the ignorance and confusion she manifested when faced with one of these student tasks. “Four,” she said at last.

“Generous,” said Natalie, and turned her attention fully to the task of bag-ventilating the infant. Despite the sedatives, the mother was still telling them to kill the baby with a knife, with a brick, with a smothering pillow. She sat up suddenly, an obscene apparition, hauling herself up by her knees, her perfect, unnatural breasts glaring over the sterile blue drape, a tongue of clotted blood lolling out of her vagina. She calmed briefly and spoke in sane, gentle tones. “Just do it now, before she gets us. It’s easy now but it won’t always be so easy.” She reached out, grabbing for the instrument tray, until two nurses pushed her back. Jemma thought of Rob, pacing with his hands folded on top of his head, like he always did when he was impatient for a particular thing to happen. She thought of his arms again. She didn’t have to close her eyes to be able to see them.

“Let’s go,” said Natalie. She jerked her head imperiously at her intern, Dr. Chandra, who had got his stethoscope caught up in the oxygen tubing and was trying to untangle it. Natalie looked back expectantly at the fellow, Emma, who gave one sharp nod to indicate her blessing. They moved out of the operating room and down the long beige halls of the county hospital. Patients, women walking in the hope of accelerating their labor, spun out of their way as the team raced along, Emma pushing the isolette, Natalie bagging, and Dr. Chandra still trying to untangle his stethoscope. Jemma, not a good hurrier,

trailed after the isolette. It had been part of the reason she failed her surgery rotation, this reluctance to hustle, and even when her grade was at stake she could never bring herself to be snappy, or do that wiggling power walk on rounds, or even run full-out to a code or a trauma—if you were too fast, after all, you got there first. She ran a few steps, then slowed, then ran again. As they approached the bridge, Natalie called back to her to get the door, since Dr. Chandra had also entangled his name tag and calculator in the mess of tubing.

Jemma ran ahead to slap the giant steel button that opened the doors. They swung out leisurely, opening on the storm that flashed and raged around the glass hall. The team pushed through even before the doors were fully open. Jemma ran ahead again, meaning to slap the far button with the same authority and force with which she'd hit the near one, but she tripped, then rolled fast and heavy into the door. Natalie yelled, "Get out of the way!" Jemma hit the button and the second set of doors swung open, less leisurely than those at the other end of the hall, but not fast. She scooted on her bottom, pushed aside by the door and finally wedged against the glass wall as the isolette flew past. Lightning arched overhead and showed her a vast parking lot, empty except for a few dozen dead cars stranded in water up to their headlights.

The lightning passed, and then the glass wall showed Jemma her own haggard face. Nursery call was beginning to wear on her. They were always flying to one delivery or another, back and forth across this sky bridge at all hours of the morning, day, and night. Here in a hospital that attracted the riskiest pregnancies, the ones that ended with the expulsion of a half dead baby, there was no rest for a person afflicted with a delivery pager. Jemma rose and leaned against the glass, closing her eyes and imagining that the little creature in her high-tech bassinet was wheeling away at a thousand miles an hour, on her way to Heaven instead of a hell of needles and tubes. When the lightning flashed again in the sky she opened her eyes and saw how the rain was falling in sheets. "All pediatricians are nice," Rob had told her two weeks before, on the evening before the rotation started. "These are going to be the best six weeks of your life."

"What am I doing here?" she asked herself softly, not for the first time wondering what she was doing in the hospital at four in the morning, what she was doing training for a profession to which she felt no true calling, doing work she knew she could tolerate but never love. She pressed her head further into the glass, conscious of but not caring about the security camera recording her episode of self-pity. She was imagining again the other professions she

might have pursued—airline pilot, horticulturist, tomb raider—when a terrible noise, a nasty, wet slap, startled her. She leaped away from the glass and saw the bird: the tremendous wind had blown a gull against the bridge. Its beady eye caught and held hers, and it opened and closed its mouth four times, thrusting out its red tongue in a gesture both exhausted-looking and suggestive, before the wind lifted it and sent it sliding over the arch of the glass to spin away into the darkness.

Jemma had lived in the city three years and never seen a storm like this. Rob had lived there all his life and judged this one pretty tame so far. They'd walked that morning from her apartment to the hospital complex, Jemma soaking her scrub pants to the knees when she waded through puddles in her rubber clogs. The hospital was just a big white lump in the rain, its lofty spirals and curling edges obscured, so it looked to Jemma like it was melting, and she wondered if they would even have found their way there if not for the giant round lights on the roof.

She turned away from the glass and kicked the big silver button to open the doors, then passed into the children's hospital. As many times as she'd passed from the hospital behind her into the hospital before her, she was still struck by the change. The beige walls of the adult hospital were replaced by a motley of primary color, linoleum the color of bile turned to firm carpet printed with hopscotch numbers, and the path to the NICU was laid out in the tiniest footprints. Jemma followed them, thinking as she walked how they might have been left by some impossibly toddling preemie—they were as red as the bloody red feet of a twenty-four-weeker, one of those unfinished things whose skin slipped off between your fingers if you pinched too hard. She walked past the giant pictures on the walls, six-foot by four-foot photos of healthy children at play. She thought it strange to hang pictures like these in a place where sick children lived, as if to scream at them: Look what you're missing. Closer to the unit the pictures gave way to magnified newspaper articles detailing the triumphant progress made by the hospital in saving smaller and smaller babies. One sentence, picked out in bold beneath a photo of Dr. Bump, one of the supreme neonatologists, always caught her eye: *One day we'll be able to save the ones so small you can't even see them.* Jemma raised a hand to flick him in his nose as she passed—he was famously cruel to students and had just that week made her friend Vivian cry secret, locked-in-the-bathroom tears. Jemma pressed her ID badge to a sensor by the double doors of the unit and they opened with a hiss. The hall inside was quiet, but she could see through another set of doors into the first bay, where a cluster of doctors, nurses, and

technicians were gathered around a bed she knew must be the new baby's. She strode past the nurses lounging and gossiping in the hall, making her face a mask of purpose to discourage them from challenging her, like they usually did, with "Are you lost, sweetie?" Inside the bay, she was shooed into a corner. She watched the muttering cluster of bodies around the bed until it disgorged Rob, who clutched an endotracheal tube forlornly as he sidled up next to her, touching her arm with his arm.

"I was supposed to get to do the UA catheter, but then Natalie did it. Like she needed to do another one—she's only done a million of them. I was supposed to get to intubate after she pulled out her tube, but then they wouldn't let me intubate a baby with a cleft palate. Chandra did it, or he tried. When he screwed it up, Emma took over. I didn't do anything. Why am I even here?" He shook his head. "Did you know that she's the daughter of a king?" Jemma nodded. It was common knowledge: this baby's father was some sort of latter-day satrap, a king of the East who had fetched himself a blond, horse-toothed bride from a women's college in New Jersey. The hospital attracted these stories. The giant-headed, cancerous, rotting offspring of the wealthy and fabulous mingled with the children whose living and lineage were common but whose diseases were so exclusive they were, if not entirely unique, limited to a select handful of sufferers. They came from all over the country and the world to put themselves at the mercy of bright minds.

"Come with me," Jemma said. "I need you." He watched her finger as she raised it very slowly to place it on top of her head. It was not a seductive or even graceful maneuver, but he started at it, his eyes widened, and he looked back and forth from Jemma to the baby to Jemma again. "Come on," she said.

He lifted the ET tube toward her and shook it once, looked back again at the baby and smiled. "I don't know," he said.

"You said it yourself," she said. "Why are you here?" She turned her leg out, wondering as she did it why she was presenting him with her beefy hip. It was not her best feature, and if he had ever praised it, it was only when he was drunk or utterly overcome with lust.

"Maybe we shouldn't."

"Maybe not," she said, but she put her finger on her head again, and stood there a moment with her hip thrust out and her foot extended—it was the pose of a retarded ballerina, but it was all it took to get him to follow her out.

They know where we are going, and they know what we are going to do, Jemma thought as they passed by the nurses' station. It always seemed to her that people must know, and yet she was sure that nobody did. There were

stories told of promiscuous decades long past, where people fucked madly in call rooms, operating rooms, or under the beds of the comatose, but she had never heard of it happening this year, or in this new hospital, not yet even a year old. The first time had been just two weeks before, at the beginning of the rotations that had landed them in the children's hospital with the same call schedule. He had comforted her with it when Jemma came seeking him after her first delivery, a harrowing festival of abuse where it seemed that everyone had yelled at her for her incompetence: the obstetric and pediatric residents when she fumbled and nearly dropped the slimy baby; the baby's mother, understandably cranky but too shrill, really, for any occasion save her own stabbing death; and even the baby himself, who parted his blue lips to caw at her, and who shat tarry meconium down her shirt. She cleaned up in Rob's call room and he met her with a towel when she came out of the shower, rubbing her beyond dry. They considered, before formally beginning it, that they should not, and before continuing and finishing had a brief conversation in which they decided that they should not continue, let alone finish. That night, and again on their second and third call nights, Jemma had said, "We had better not ever do this again," and he had said, "Not here, anyway."

But it always seemed like such a good idea when they did it, and it never took much more than their prearranged signal—the single finger placed on top of the head—to get him to agree. And it hardly seemed so bad, even after they finished and lay panting against each other, face to face, both staring guiltily at their pagers as if inviting from them a shrill, musical reprimand. There were worse things one could be doing. There were a multitude of drugs available for the consumption of the enterprising medical student—Rob was a competent enough hacker and Jemma a thief with long childhood experience, and not even the monolithic pyxis system that guarded every medication would have been able to withstand them if they had chosen to shoot up some propofol or snort morphine or place a row of fentanyl patches along their spines. They could be exceeding their authority in all sorts of ways—more a temptation for Rob than for Jemma—by attempting complicated procedures without supervision. There were babies they could have been dropping and children whose unshielded eyes might cry to a more sinister couple to be plucked out and parents vulnerable to lies and rumors of cure or of death. There was mischief worse than kissing Rob and lifting off his shirt. She was reluctant to give up his lips but eager to bare his belly and his chest, and because she would not pull her mouth away from his he left

the shirt hanging, a collar around his neck. It was nothing to hand each other the gift of a screwing, and more than nothing. It was a great thing, and the greatest thing—not the end of the world but a way to put the world utterly at bay and escape momentarily and intermittently from her awful past, her anxious present, and her dispiriting future, a way to escape from the hospital, a way to not be here—to undo the pink cord that held up his scrubs, pull down his pants, sing out the long O, and fall on him with her mouth.

Their courtship was complicated. Long before he transferred into her class in their second year of medical school she had become convinced that everyone she loved was required by fate or God to die, and what could be more logical than that the wages of death should be loneliness? First her brother had died. When he was seventeen and she was fourteen he killed himself in a ritual of superhuman agony, leaving behind his burnt, partially dismembered body and a book that Jemma could hardly stand to read, though she understood that it was written more for her than for anyone else. She threw it in the Severn River a month after Calvin died.

Her father died next, eaten up swiftly by lung cancer. His first symptom—a fine tremor in his surgeon's hand—came in the summer when Jemma was seventeen. By January he was bedridden. By April he was delirious, mets in his brain having displaced the tissues that formerly had made a home for his reason. By July he could not speak, but only cried out when something frightened him, and spent whole afternoons in his living-room bed, reaching for invisible things in the air around his head.

“Free at last!” her mother said, after her father was dead. He had never had any time for her, and they had married for all the wrong reasons, or for no reason at all, and she was twenty-one years tired of his selfishness and his mean drunks and his mighty fists, though really it was his blood more than hers that Jemma always found herself encountering in the aftermath of one of their great fights. It would leap out at her against the bright green linoleum of the kitchen floor, or else she would tread in it walking down the dark hallway outside their bedroom, or it would be there in the morning, a pattern on the wall above the breakfast table, spread by a blow to the head with the great bedpost-sized pepper shaker that her mother could wield with the speed and skill of a ninja assassin. There was always a shape to find in the blood, spread into swirls and smears in a clumsy, drunken clean-up, birds and bones and the delicate reaching leaves of a fern. But even so her mother had

taken the tenderest care of him in his illness. Calvin would have said that she loved him best when he was utterly at her mercy.

Free at last, her mother planned a trip around the world, and Jemma was not invited. "I'll come back with your new daddy," she said, calling Jemma at school on the eve of her departure. "Mr. Belvedere will be his name-o." It was only six o'clock but she was ten p.m. drunk.

"Have a good time," Jemma said. "Send lots of postcards."

"I may not have time for postcards. I'm going to be awfully busy living for myself for the first time in my fucking life."

"I'm glad for you," was all Jemma said. But though her mother really had bought a round-the-world airplane ticket, and though she had planned the trip in painstaking detail with a dog-faced travel agent named Sue, and though she had packed six months' worth of safari clothes and sensible shoes, she never went on the trip. Instead, not long after hanging up with Jemma, she set fire to their house and burned herself up with it. I didn't see her do it, but I can imagine it as well as Jemma could: her mother settled calmly in the kitchen chair where she was accustomed to do her drinking, smoking with her eyes closed while the walls burned. She left no note.

Three deaths should have been enough to demonstrate Jemma's danger, but they only made her suspect the horrible truth. It was easy to say instead that insanity and bad genes and tobacco were to blame. Three deaths hurried her more resolutely into the arms of her lover, a boy named Martin Marty who she'd been dating since they were in tenth grade. "We are already a family now," he said to her one night not long after her mother's funeral, because ever since Calvin he was always saying things meant to comfort her which only ended up horrifying her. He drove home drunk from a New Year's party when they were juniors in college and was killed in a collision with a tree. Even then, she didn't understand, and when the knowledge came, it was in slow bits, accretions that rose a little higher every day in her mind until they spelled out the shape and the letter of her doom. One day she woke up crying and knew it for sure: everyone she had loved was dead, and everyone she loved would die.

So she promised herself she wouldn't speak to Rob Dickens—she could see her crush as a black affliction hovering over him, and knew it was only wanted for her to speak to him before it would settle. She had so many graves available for swearing on, but that would be no use; she already knew herself for an oath-breaker, tried and untrue. She watched him during lectures, and watched him run by her apartment every morning, knowing she should avert her eyes, and yet she stared at him brazenly, dreadful window whore, and

engaged him in weeks of abbreviated morning conversation. She swore she would not go out with him, if he should ask, but when he did ask she said yes without hesitation. And she took a solemn vow not to kiss him, but compelled by necessity, she did that, too. Outside her house, after dinner, she stood above him on a step and bent her head down to put her mouth on his. It was not a chaste kiss. It was very familiar, so intimate it was almost gruesome. She thought about his dinner the whole time she kissed him, the way he had eaten it, the way his thick wrist poked out of his shirt cuff when he cut his meat. She had not tasted veal since she was in fifth grade, when Emma Rose McBurney detailed the sad fate of a veal calf for her, and showed her a movie after school. Jemma had wept at the enormous cruelty of veal, and sworn never to eat it again. But she tasted it in his mouth that night, and on his breath when he blew it into her lungs. She pulled away, gasped a little, and coughed.

“Goodnight!” she said, and ran away upstairs and into her apartment, where a roach was waiting for her, perched on the counter in the little kitchen set in a corner of her living room. It was a great big bug, black as the blackest beetle, and as she stood in the door watching it watch her, her imagination invested it with a parental mixture of fury and concern. Its wriggling antennae were signing to her. Where have you been? it demanded. What were you doing? She hated roaches, but she was afraid to kill it because she suspected it might contain the soul of her first lover—somehow it seemed most likely to be him, and not her brother or her father or her mother. Spiders, frogs, little reptiles—all creatures that horrified her—any of them might contain that soul wandered back to be near her, and so she was gentle toward them. The roach skibbled down a cabinet and ran at her. When she fled it pursued her down the hall, running not just on the floor but on the walls and the ceiling in a big loose spiral. She got to her bedroom, slammed the door and stared anxiously at the space underneath it. It was big enough to admit two roaches, one piggy-backing on top of the other, but the roach didn't come in. He never came into her bedroom—they seemed to have an agreement about that. Still, she imagined him scolding her from the other side of the door, just like a parent might. What were you thinking? he asked. Are you trying to kill him?

From her window she peeped down at the sidewalk. Rob wasn't there, but she thought she could see his wide, handsome back retreating over the bridge across the street. It spanned a little horseshoe-shaped canal, which many decades before had been a swimming hole, but now was too toxic for bathing. He lived only a few blocks away. If he ran home along the top of the

thin railing that kept children from falling into the poisoned waters, it would not be a surprise, because it was his habit to leap up on things, and to test his balance against ledges and curbs and sills. And if he fell into the water and drowned, it would not be a surprise, because she had imperiled him with her kiss.

She lay down on her narrow bed, the same one upon which she'd been sleeping since she was five years old, on the old mattress that still bore the deep impression of the much fatter body she used to inhabit, and she dreamed of veal. In her sleep she followed the weeping of a calf through gray half-darkness, until she found its miserable stall. It cried with the voice of a human child. She knelt to quiet it, saying, There, there, little one, it will be all right. But she knew it would die to please the appetites of man. She cried, ashamed of how she had lied to it, and it began to comfort her. Its little hoof stroked her head, and its soft lips kissed her cheek and her mouth. In a little while longer they were making out, she and the veal calf. Its thick, nimble tongue darted over her own and made her mouth an organ of intense pleasure.

She woke up feeling dizzy and hungover, though she'd had only a single glass of wine the night before. Her mouth tasted like veal, and her room smelled of it. She felt sure that she must have been panting through her mouth the whole night long, polluting her room with the odor of cruel meat. She went to the window to get a breath of untainted air. It was almost seven o'clock, time for him to come running by. He would be wet from the running, and she would think, as she always did, about how it had always seemed to her that people looked better when they were wet, and she would remember ducking repeatedly into the bathroom in high school, where she would wet down her hair in the hope of improving her looks. She'd felt beautiful just once in her life, caught in a rainstorm with her first lover. In the middle of a busy sidewalk he'd kissed her and, with his hand cradling her head, had squeezed out a flood of water from her hair. When it fell down her neck, under her collar, she felt it even over the pouring rain.

She stood at the window, looking back and forth between her clock and the street. At exactly seven he came running over the bridge. He stopped at the bottom of her stoop, and shaded his eyes against the sun to look up at her. "Hi there!" he called up. She could feel her four dead standing behind her, and hear them calling down, Welcome to the family!

Please, she said to them. She was supposed to close her shutters and go sit on her bed, and consider how she had done the right thing, but instead she just stood there, staring at him stupidly until he asked her for another date.

"What kind of doctor do you want to be?" she asked him, surely a first-date question, but she didn't ask it until that night, over dinner at a vegetarian restaurant.

"The nice kind," he said.

"Are there other kinds?"

"Medicine brings out the worst in a person."

"I don't think so. Do you really think so?"

"Maybe," he said. "But think about it. You see people at their absolute worst, and all your own personal failings—your weakness, your stupidity, your laziness—show up in their continuing decline. And even if you make them better, they just come back, sicker and needier."

He looked down at his plate, quietly scooping and dumping his fancy macaroni and cheese with a big spoon. "It's a privilege to see people at their worst," she told him, which was something her father liked to say. "You seem nice enough still."

"I'm already corrupted," he said.

"You still smell good, though," she said without thinking about it, and blushed furiously. "I mean, if you were really corrupt you'd smell like bad meat or old yogurt or..." She put a carrot in her mouth so she would stop talking.

"How about you?" he asked her.

"Oh yes, very corrupt."

"I mean what do you want to end up doing?"

"Surgery," she said. "Surgery, surgery—my dad was a surgeon."

"A legacy of corruption," he said, smiling. Now he had insulted her—reason enough to throw a carrot at him but not reason enough to kill him; still she just sat there, anxious and admiring. He had very large hands.

She took the vow again: no kisses. And she further swore that when he tried to kiss her, she would hold up her hand and drop her chin. She had practiced the gesture in front of her mirror, shaped her smile until she thought it could only be interpreted as regretful and demure, and practiced the backward walk. "I can't," she'd said to her reflection. "I just can't," words chosen because they were truthful and because they seemed most likely to cause the least hurt. Hand still in the air, she'd walk backward toward her door, not speaking, not answering him if he spoke, then go upstairs to sit at her kitchen table and watch the roach shiver with delight when she told him how it was all over.

The roach was waiting for them when she led Rob upstairs. Not five feet from the door, it seemed to be settling its weight impatiently back and forth

from one set of legs to the other. “I’ll get it,” said Rob, and took a step forward to stomp the bug. Jemma threw her whole body into him and pushed him off balance. He stumbled across the room and fell, striking his head on the soft edge of the couch. The roach fled.

“Sorry!” she said, speaking to him and the roach both. “Sorry!” He’d apologized just like that when she ducked away from his goodnight kiss. She had raised her hand in the practiced gesture of final forbidding, but rather than make the gesture she thought she wanted—stop, go away, we can’t do this—it had fastened on his hot ear and drawn his face to hers. Sprawled by the couch, he lay very still for a moment, and she worried that he was dead already. When she helped him up she kept her hand in his and drew him back to her bedroom.

Was the thumping noise the bedpost knocking on her wall, or was it the roach throwing himself in fury against her door? She’d sealed up the crack with a towel so he couldn’t intrude if anger drove him to break their unspoken agreement, but she could hear him in the guttural utterances that issued from her new friend, deep, groaning syllables that rearranged themselves in her head into words—*what are you doing, what are you doing*, and then *what have you done?*

“I can’t see you anymore,” she told him the next day. It was easier to say than she’d anticipated that it would be. The words came out of her mouth in a smooth, fluid rush.

On the bridge across the canal, she was walking him home, he on the railing but holding on to her hand. When she was small she’d walked that way with her mother, her mother’s arm lending her balance, and the rail or bench elevating her so they were equally tall. But the rail made him much taller than Jemma, and he was too sure of his balance to need a loan from her.

“Don’t say that,” he said. The sun was just behind him, so his head seemed replaced by a ball of flame. She closed her eyes against him and saw not just the blinking orange globe but his face, too, in disappointed afterimage.

“I can’t see you anymore,” she said again, not opening her eyes but stepping back and pulling her hand free.

“Why not?”

“Because,” she said.

“What did I do?”

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s just a bad idea. No, just that... it’s just impossible, is all.”

"Why?"

"Because it is."

"But it isn't," he said. She didn't reply, and they stood facing each other in silence. She opened her eyes one at a time, just peeping at first, thinking he might be gone, but he still stood there looking down at her with his arms folded across his chest. People passed them, single or in pairs or accompanied by dogs, and some stared curiously.

"Look," he said finally, "it's always impossible, isn't it? *This* is impossible, but happens anyway. Watch." He swung his arms behind him, then brought them forward over his head, and the rest of his body followed, first his belly, then his thighs, and then his feet flying up not a foot from her nose, making a breeze that she felt against her ears. He flipped full around once and landed solidly on the rail. It was perfectly done. He would not have fallen if Jemma hadn't grabbed at him and knocked him off balance. She shrieked and put out both her hands to pull him in, but she only succeeded in pushing him into the pond. He looked distinctly surprised and even betrayed as he fell, but made no sound as he went into the water.

Now I've done it, she thought calmly, but not resisting an urge to pull miserably at her face. A vision flashed in her head of his very white bones surfacing in the acid water and bobbing about a little before dissolving into pink, marrowy foam.

"I made it!" he called up to her. "I had it landed before you pushed me!" She ran off down the bridge, meaning to run entirely out of his life. He could suffer a collision with her and not die for it. He would suffer this little damage and then go on living. Goodbye, goodbye! she called out in her head as she ran, imagining the other woman he would find. She would be prettier than Jemma but stupider, and she would be the type of woman compelled to uncover the past lovers of her lovers. When she heard the story of Jemma's behavior she would be utterly unable to fathom it.

"I'm only calling," she told him four days later, "to tell you I can never see you again. And to tell you to stop calling me every day."

"Okay," he said.

"It makes me embarrassed for you," she said. "All the messages."

"Yes. Will you see me tonight?"

"Of course," she said, meaning to say, of course she would *like* to, but she certainly could not. But he had hung up and was already on his way to the

bridge. When he stood under her window and called for her she went down to him, a voice in her head as she went down the stairs—her mother's or her brother's or her father's or her lover's—remarking how her resolve was as sturdy as a peeled banana.

But I like him, she said to herself, to them, slowing on the curving steps.

It doesn't matter.

And he likes me, I think.

It doesn't matter.

And I need him.

Who's to say what's necessary? What's your need compared to his life?

You're just being superstitious.

Is it superstition to insist that the sun rises in the East?

Shut up! she said, not out loud—she wasn't that crazy. Though she could call them out of the dark to stand silently around her bed, and though they were the constant companions of her dreams, and though she still consulted her mother on which days were skirt days and which days were pants days, and exalted with her brother in a great high or a stupendous drunk, and though she continued to have imaginary, masturbatory sex with her departed lover, she knew they weren't real when they stood before her on the last four steps, raising their hands in the gesture she had practiced: stop, no more, go back upstairs. Four is enough, her father said. She passed right through them.

She thought that she might catch the roach and set it free outside, but it hid from her whenever she sought it. A few times, studying on her couch, she felt watched, and looked up to see it on the counter, waving its antennae as if in admonition or warning. When she chased it, it evaded her easily. Her best opportunity to banish it was whenever Rob Dickens came for her. The roach was always waiting near the door, but if she caught it she'd have to spirit it past him, or else hold it in her purse until there was a time in their evening when she could set free. The dinnertime disaster had already played a few times in her head: her purse carelessly closed; a tickle on her leg, belly, breast and neck; the roach emerging from around her ear to perch on her head and regard the endangered rival; the screams of the waitress.

He was a candle lover. They gave his bedroom the air of a chamber of sacrifice; they were all around his bed, in free-standing iron sconces, on the nightstands and dresser, in an enormous chandelier brought back from a year in Belgium. When they were all lit, the room was almost as bright as a hospital hallway. It was the bedroom of a priest, or a ritual murderer, and laying eyes upon it she'd had a surge of hope, that he might be crazy, too. Always

she required him to extinguish some, so the light became gentler. When she looked at him his dripping face wavered with the light, and it became the face of her first. He spoke her name to her, but she never answered with his, for fear of a mix-up.

Sound asleep in her new lover's bed, she dreamed of her old lover. She stood on a corner well away from her parents' house, waiting for him to pick her up. It was one of their routines—she'd sneak out her window and fleetly step down the birch tree that grew next to the house and she'd wait for him at the top of the hill. He drove up like he always did, but his dream car was the ruined image of his waking car, and he was a ruined image of himself.

Get in, he told her, and she did, folding herself tight to squeeze under the sagging roof.

You're late, she said.

Let's not put this on me, he said. Let's put this where it belongs. Do you have any idea what you're doing?

Don't you yell at me, she said, like she had when he was alive.

Do you have any idea? Any idea at all? Is there even a brain in your head?

Don't yell at her, said a voice from the back. She looked there and saw her brother, folded up even more extremely than she was. His blue eyes seemed to glow in the dark car. He was whole, not cut or burned or twisted.

Who the fuck asked you?

Slow down, said Jemma, because while her attention had shifted to the back of the car the landscape had changed, and now they were hurling down foggy roads lined with trees covered with dying, hand-shaped leaves.

Are you out of your fucking mind? asked Martin. He let go of the wheel so he could gesticulate wildly at her, and they ran headlong into a tree. She was thrown from the car, or else the car evaporated—she found herself seated on the cool ground watching the tree they'd hit. It was on fire. The hand-shaped leaves were lifted off by the flames and went spinning up into the sky. What is it? asked her brother. What is beautiful about him?

Rob Dickens was mumbling next to her ear when she woke. He was a sleep-talker. She had already spent a night or two listening closely to his rambling, thinking he might disclose to her some sort of fascinating personal secret, but what he said was only gibberish. He owned an emperor-sized bed, abducted, like the chandelier, out of Belgium. Why a Belgian should require such a large bed, she could not figure—she had had the idea since kindergarten that tiny people lived in tiny countries—unless it was for the reason she required that night, so that she could remove herself to a

great distance and yet still be in bed with him. She slid to the very edge of the bed and watched him sleep. She strained her eye in the dark to follow the line of his body from his toe to his head, and then she sought to penetrate his face and his very mind with her gaze, all the while asking herself, what is *not* beautiful about him?

He opened his eyes as she watched him.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. He put his hand out to her, not reaching her despite the length of his arm.

“Come here.”

“No,” she said, and considered, not for the last time, how she was bad for him. “You will always know,” Sister Gertrude had told her class of trembling third-graders. “You will always know the wrong thing, and choose it freely.” Sister Gertrude was a million years away now; all that time had made her pathetic and small—she was just a nun-shaped nubbin on a chain of nun-nubbins hung in a chain around her dead brother’s neck. But Jemma really had always known the wrong thing, and chosen it, and so she chose it now. Angels should be singing, or devils shrieking, or the walls should shake. No, no no no! cried her ghosts, but she quieted them. What was true to her she put away for what was sensible. What was safe she put away for what would put him at risk. What was lonely, what would redeem her, what would have made her the saint of her own obsession, she put away for selfish need, or for love. She took his reaching hand.

With her mouth engaged she looked through his legs at the lightning in the window. It flashed through the water—falling so heavily against the glass that she was reminded of the time they’d made out in a car wash—and cast their shadow on the wall of the darkened room. She paused to catch her breath and turned her face to the wall, to see the curious silhouette, the way his neck and shoulders grew out from between her thighs, and how his legs, thrust out from her shoulders so they looked in shadow like her third and fourth arms, shuddered and waved. She turned her attention back to him, but still cast glances synchronous with the lightning so she could see how they made insects, trees, and Eastern deities on the wall, until they rolled off the bed and his mouth came inching up her body, to find her own mouth. Then she only saw his face, closer and closer. When the lightning flashed again she imagined it echoing in the globe of his eye.

Strange, certainly, that witnessing a delivery should make her need this, but stranger still that she should try to ruin the joy of it with dark thoughts. Always when they were together like this, especially when they were desperately and ferociously together like this, when she really ought not to have the capacity to consider anything but the immediacy of her overwhelming pleasure, still the greater portion of her thought, even as she and Rob clawed and pulled at one another, and stood, and lay down, and stood up, and squatted, and knelt, and stood again, was devoted to her brother, her parents, and her first lover. She had used to think that her ghosts presented themselves in her mind to warn her—again and again and again, every day and night of her life forever and forever—of the obvious: that everyone she loved must die. Then she wondered if they might not be spectators at fleshly events to which they could never again be party, and she found herself savoring the tastes and collisions and knotty tensions for their sake. And finally she knew it was because they were always with her that they were with her at this seemingly most inappropriate time, and it was only her own perverse will that called them out of memory to present themselves. But now she could get it over in a flash, the thought of them. As swiftly as if they were handing her off from each to each in a frenetic dance she passed among them—father, mother, lover, brother. She spent an instant at each funeral and saw her parents' caskets, and she saw the box that hid her brother's ashes, all that was left after the butchery he performed upon himself. And she saw her lover's face, marred by the obscene reconstructions of the mortician. His eyes had been left open at his weird mother's request. Jemma had been sure he'd winked at her as the casket was closed.

Rob pressed his forehead against hers, so hard she thought their heads must break into each other, and their brains would mix like yolks. "Come back," he said.

It called to Jemma's mind a spinning fun-house trick room, the way they rolled along the walls. It would not have surprised her too much to open her eyes and discover herself pinned against the ceiling by Rob's handsome hips. They rolled against the door. After a little while, when she heard a new noise, she thought at first it was her foot fluttering against the wood, but it was somebody knocking. They grew still, and Jemma wondered if the door was locked. The knock came again, louder and more forceful. The door handle jiggled, and a voice called through the door. "Hello? Is anyone inside? I left my pencil case." For what seemed like five whole minutes the person worked the handle. Is it so difficult to understand, Jemma wondered,

when a door is locked? And then she wondered who carried pencil cases out of sixth grade, anyhow.

Rob arched his back and neck to look at her—he was myopic and not wearing his glasses. While the door handle rattled he lifted a hand and ran his finger down her forehead, over her nose, mouth, and chin, down her neck and chest and stomach until his finger was resting exactly in her belly button. Even after the person on the other side of the door finally gave up, Rob regarded her silently.

“What?” she whispered, and he brought his face so close to hers that the sweat rolling off her nose clung briefly to his before falling to strike her foot. “I love you,” he said. *Ob no*. You are over that, Jemma. There’s no harm in this, and no mischief, and O I will fill chapters in the Book of the King’s Daughter with all the evil things you and he could be doing now, and though God is even now raising His hand to strike the world, it is not to punish your pleasure, or because a good man loves you, or because you love him, or because you have angered your dead, or betrayed the dreadful imaginary empiricisms that support your depressing logic. Fine, swallow your words—that low, warbling groan contains the same number of syllables as I love you, and it’s close enough for Rob. Fine, spike your delight with dread, but don’t stop, please don’t stop now.

Fine orgasms recalled others. She was not a person who reflected all the next day on the pleasure, and wasted hours on the daydreamy wanting of it. But as she approached the finish with Rob Dickens, she thought of the time with her first lover when she had been sure she’d briefly felt all he felt, and had been disappointed at what he got, because it seemed so small, a spasm that satisfied for less than a second and left behind a terrible need. She thought of the time in college she’d stepped ever-so-carefully home after a night of drinking mushroom tea with her friend Vivian and a set of silly girls from her organic chemistry class. She’d spent the dawn hours with a banana and an imaginary creature she named the Monkey King. And what she thought was her first, when she was still in grade school, in a dream, when Jesus had floated down from Heaven to become a pure white glow beneath her sheets.

Now she bent down on the floor in a compact posture of worship. Rob was behind her. He was unable to keep silent. She heard his singing moan with utter clarity—it struck a chord in her and increased her pleasure—but kept silent herself, helped by the Hello Kitty pencil case, found under the bed, which she’d wedged in her mouth. She could feel the pencils roll and crunch under her teeth as she got closer, and she could still hear the thunder

rolling, though the lightning had stopped. "I'm right there," said Rob. "I'm right there."

When Jemma looked up toward the window she saw that it was entirely black, blank even of the washing rain. She felt suddenly lifted up, as if someone were tossing her high in the air, or like she was riding an elevator at insane speeds thousands of feet into the sky. It was almost unbearable, and she cried out, despite her best efforts to keep silent. She got lost briefly, imagining herself bursting apart in a most agreeable explosion. She watched calmly as forty little Jemmas (she had time to count them) went flying out on curling tracks, trailing fairy-dust sparkles out of their bottoms. They faded, except for one, who calmly regarded Jemma with a face that became the face of the King's Daughter, wise and malformed. It stared and stared until Jemma opened her eyes.

"Oh God," Rob said, then leaned forward over her, pressing his chest against her back, his face into her neck, and placing his hands around her belly.

"What's happening?" Jemma asked, confused now, and a little nauseated because the lifted sensation was still with her. She felt them being drawn higher and higher. The window was a slate; it did not reflect them when they rose unsteadily on their cramped legs to try to look through it. Then they were lifted with a new force, so hard and fast that they fell down and lay together with their faces pressed against the carpet. She knew quite certainly that something horrible was happening, and that it was all her fault—I got him, after all, she thought, and, Here it is, and, How stupid, to think it could end anyway but like this. She heard a voice, courteous and mechanical, and certainly a voice apart from the babbling chorus in her head. It said, "Creatures, I am the preserving angel. Fear not, I will keep you. Fear not, I will protect you. Fear not, you will bide with me. Fear not, I will carry you into the new world."



The problem in me is the problem in the world. The problem in the world is the problem in me. I have always known this. Even when I did not understand it, it was still in me, the question and the answer together, knotted up like a pair of hands clenched together in pathetic anguished prayer.

When I was five years old I tried to kill my sister. All day long I tried to kill her. In the morning I put mothballs in her cereal, but our mother woke up and threw them away, not because she smelled the naphthalene, but because she thought cereal was for trailer park kids, and on the days when she could get out of bed in time—a century’s weight of ghosts kept her sleeping or staring at the ceiling in her darkened room until noon many days—she would make us fancy omelets.

I took my sister for a walk and tried to sacrifice her on a stone picnic table in the Severna Forest Coliseum. I knew the story of Isaac. I knew the whole of the Old Testament by then. I raised a smooth stone as big as my fist and prepared to knock a hole in her skull. I waited too long, imagining the blood on the stone and a clump of her hair matted to it. A troop of Brownies came rustling through the tall grass—the coliseum was built by a wealthy Baptist with a passion for Greek tragedy and outdoor theater, but once he moved away it was let to fall into disrepair—and Jemma leaped off the table and ran to dance with them around one of the decaying plaster statues.

I tried to drown her in the tub. Our mother was throwing a party for the elites of our neighborhood, which is to say for everybody, since everyone who

lived there was odiously rich, the cat-food magnate having established a tradition of exclusivity in this heavily wooded peninsula on the Severn. She sent us together to the tub, and I washed my sister's hair, just as I had been taught to do, and then when she ducked under the water to rinse I held her there. I had never been taught to drown a person, but I knew just what to do. My hands felt old and wise as she struggled under them. I am sending you to Jesus, I told her. But I remember the moment perfectly, and I know I was not trying to kill her because I thought it would make her happy.

And finally I pushed her off the roof. We dressed up for the party, and wandered from drunk to drunk, inhabiting a whole different world from the one at their level of sight. Four feet off the ground, nobody noticed if you stole a cigarette from where it was burning in the ashtray, or nipped from unattended drinks. No one noticed that I was drunk. I only got more sullen and angry, and so it hardly showed. We were sent to bed, but we did not sleep. I took Jemma out on the roof, something I did all the time. And usually I would tell her all the things that had made me angry that day, or point out lights on the river, or try to get her to see shapes in the stars. But tonight all I could think of was the crowd in our house and on the deck. It was late in September but very warm, and from where we sat on the top of the roof I could see men in short sleeves and women in short dresses, but none of them thought to look up, and they would probably not have seen us anyway in our dark pajamas.

Look at them, I said to my sister. Just look at them! And I thought that she must be like me, and that just for her to see them would be for her to hate them, like just to see the world was to hate it, every little cloud and bird and bush, and just to look in the mirror was to hate myself so much I could feel a trembling ache all over my body. One day I'll go, I said, and then I'll take them all. I did not know what it meant, to go. I only knew it was the right word, and the right sentiment—sudden and strange and certain as a divine inspiration. And then I pushed her at them, because I was sure just in that moment, though I knew better as soon as she started to roll, that she would be a bomb to kill them all when she hit.

Right away I regretted it. It was a mistake to push her, and it had been a mistake to try to drown her, and stone her, and poison her. It was a mistake because it was a horrible sin, the worst thing I had done and the worst thing I would ever do, and now it had set the tone and the theme for my whole life. And it was a mistake because I knew, just in that moment when I was revealed to myself as utterly depraved and irredeemably vile, that it was I and not my sister who must be the deadly sacrifice.



Dr. Chandra was in the cafeteria, the place to which he habitually retreated after an on-call humiliation. There was no consolation in pudding, but he still stuffed himself with it every time something went wrong, every time he tangled himself in something really unfortunate, or tripped at exactly the worst time, falling into another mother and squeezing at her boob for purchase. You do that more than twice and people think you are feigning clumsiness for the sake of the grope, but he thought boobs the unloveliest things in the world; he'd cross the street to avoid a particularly large, stern pair. Every time he wrote the wrong dosage for a drug, and every time he got caught only pretending to hear a murmur or making up a laboratory value he'd failed to memorize, he'd come down to the cafeteria, always to the same table if it was available, stuck in a glass alcove, windows that looked over the memorial butterfly garden. You didn't have to be a dead child to get a butterfly there, but that was mostly what they represented, premies who never made it out of the nursery or toddlers who couldn't beat their brain tumor or teens who succumbed to leukemia. The pudding was cheap and filling. He ate it and ate it until he thought he could feel it squeezing from the pores of his nose.

"Is it in?" he had asked Emma, when he had tried to intubate the monstrous child.

"I don't fucking know," she said. "We're tubing a baby, not having sex."

Then she bumped him out of the way and looked in the child's mouth. "In his brain, maybe," she said, yanking out the tube, then putting in another, all in about twenty seconds. "There you go," she said, patting Dr. Chandra on the shoulder. She walked off, and he noticed for the hundredth time how she had curls that really bounced. Natalie was shaking her head. The medical student was staring at the ceiling. When the respiratory therapist asked him for vent settings, Chandra just walked away.

I could just leave, he thought to himself in the cafeteria. It was a thought that had occurred to him before, to walk out of residency, out of the hospital, and out of the horrible half-life. He'd walked out of rotations before, but only as far as the Residency Director's office, to complain and to cry to the man who insisted they all call him Dad. Nothing ever came of it, and he always went back to work. Tonight it was raining too hard to walk out, though maybe that would be a better option than remaining—to leave the hospital and be swept away, out into the bay and through the Golden Gate, out to the Farrallons where he could live on puffins and baby seals, a better diet than humiliation and misery and vanilla pudding.

A noise took him away from the Farallons—a surge in the wind. Suddenly it blew so heavily he felt the hospital rock. The few other late-night diners looked up from their pizza or ice cream or pudding. Chandra rose and pressed his face against the window. Now the rain was falling so hard it totally obscured the garden. When the window went dark he thought it was because of the sheer volume of rain, until he saw his pale face reflected in the depths of the darkening glass, and saw that all the others were going to the windows to examine them, too. When he pressed his face against the glass, and cupped his hands at his temples to block out the light, he still couldn't see through. Staring and squinting, he saw a dim flash of light, as if at a great distance, and thought it must be lightning struggling to shine through the rain.

"What's going on?" he asked no one in particular. Nobody answered. The others in the cafeteria only tried like he had to see out the darkened windows. He turned back and was about to try again when he felt the first big lurch. They're all going to laugh at me, he thought as he fell, just after he knocked his head on the table. But before he felt himself pressed back flat against the floor, he had time to see that everyone else was falling, too.

Three floors up Emma was relaxing—as much as she ever did on call—in her luxurious call room. It was really an attending-level call room, but then she was nearly an attending, and had anyway been outthinking and outclassing most of the attendings since her first year of fellowship. But who

needed a vanity in their call room, and to take a bath in the whirlpool tub was only asking to be called out wet and naked into the middle of a crisis. She lay in bed a little while, visiting in spirit every baby in the unit, holding them a minute in her expansive mind, considering their afflictions and trying to anticipate the dips and turns their hospital courses might take that night. There was nothing she could think of that she had not already warned Natalie to watch for, or that Natalie would not anticipate herself. You couldn't spell out everything for them, and she left more than usual unspoken with Natalie, who was smarter than the average third-year, or less dumb, at least. She did an imaginary survey of the PICU as well, since she was covering both units tonight. The regular PICU fellow was still trying to swim in.

Sirius Chandra passed briefly through her mind, tangled up and confused and goofy and already slightly smelly, she'd noticed standing close to him, though the night was hardly half-over. She thought of tracking him down in whatever hidey-hole he'd retired to, for the sort of talk a good and empathetic Fellow was supposed to deliver to a really dispirited Intern, but it seemed too late for tears and complaints and excuses. She turned on the television but it played only a moment—a glimpse of a girl and her horse who she managed to recognize as Pippi Longstocking before the station cut out, and then every station she tried was off the air. She turned it off, and sat down on the bed, and got a page, not from the unit just outside her door, but from her home.

"She's fine," her husband said as soon as he picked up the phone. Their daughter was five months old that week.

"Pretty late for a social call," she said.

"Such a storm," he said. "I couldn't sleep."

"Well, I might have been."

"Better to be woken by someone you love."

"Who says I don't love these people?"

"She's sleeping right through the thunder. Did you know she twitches when she sleeps?"

"Are you sitting there watching her again? No wonder you can't sleep. Were you checking her breathing? It's fine. It's always going to be fine, and even if it wasn't, you're not going to catch it by staring at her. You've just got to relax. Don't you think I'll tell you if there's something wrong with her? Paul? Paul?" She listened for him—sometimes he fell very silent and she could barely hear him breathing—and she thought the line was dead until a lady's voice spoke out of the phone.

“He is gone, my love. Gone forever, not to be seen again in this world. He is already drowned, but not you. You I will protect and preserve and love for all your allotted time.”

“Who is this?” Emma demanded, so nervous all of a sudden that she was holding the phone in front of her face and shouting into it. “Is this the fucking *operator*?” She only got silence for an answer, and then she got the terrible heaviness that comes of being thrust up so impossibly high, so impossibly fast. Not even an angel wielding the sheltering grace of God could cushion her fully. She fell back, like all the rest.

Down the hall, in another call room, Rob was speaking.

“Something awful has happened,” he said to Jemma, and she was reminded of her mother, who had spoken those very same words, in the same sort of frightened, croaking whisper, when Jemma came home on the night of her brother’s death. She was reminded, too, of the feeling she’d had as soon as she came in the house—she had known that something was horribly wrong before she saw anyone, before anyone delivered the news. She and Rob dressed hurriedly, pulling on each other’s scrubs by mistake, so Jemma’s shirt hung on her and Rob’s clung tight across his shoulders. Neither of them remembered to put their socks on. Jemma opened the door, after they’d both hesitated a while, listening. The hall outside was empty. The red premie footprints wandered along the carpet, same as they had when the two of them had gone into the call room. It all seemed quite normal, until a great wail, not a child’s, came washing along the walls. The telephone lady’s voice spoke as if in response. “Be comforted, my darlings.”

They followed the little footprints back toward the NICU. The call room was placed so that a person should be able to run from bed to the unit or the delivery rooms in less than two minutes, but they crept along so carefully that it took a whole five minutes just to come to the door to the glass bridge, or rather the place where that door had been. What previously had been a glass door was now a great circle of darkened glass, opaque and slate gray like the window in the call room, reflective only of flesh-colored shadows. Jemma put her hand against it and drew it back immediately. The glass was so cold her fingers stuck a little as she pulled her hand away. “What’s happening?” she asked.

“Something awful,” said Rob. “Come on.” He took her hand and drew her along, past the pictures of children at play and past the giant newspaper articles. These all looked the same to Jemma’s eye. Outside the unit, though, there was something new. Just beyond the doors, where she was sure a water

fountain had stood earlier in the evening, there was now a little recess set waist-high in the wall, surrounded on three sides with flat squares of colored glass. Just above the recess was a greater light than all the others, an amber square the size of an adult hand. Rob reached past her to press his palm against it.

“What is it?” Jemma asked.

“A door handle, I think.”

“Name me, I will keep you,” said the woman’s voice, seeming to speak from within the hole in the wall.

“Just open the door. Open the damn door.”

“Until I am named, I cannot keep you, I cannot preserve you, I cannot make the thing you desire. John Robert Dickens, I have named you, now you must name me.”

“What the fuck?” Rob said, taking his hand away. “How do you know my name? Who the fuck are you?”

“I am the preserving angel,” she said again. Jemma walked past him and swiped her badge through the old reader that still sat next to the door. The double doors were quiet a moment, as if considering whether or not she should be admitted, then suddenly swung in.

“Didn’t these used to open out?” Jemma asked. Rob was too distracted by the chaos in the unit to answer her. Nurses and doctors and assistants were running every which way. Jemma thought they were in a panic for the same reason that she wanted to be in one; they knew it, too, that something awful had happened, something to which the only proper reaction was to run around like this, from room to room, shouting and barking at each other. But it was the more ordinary pandemonium of a unit in uproar. Rob had told her about these patients, little unformed people so sensitive to disturbance that a raised voice or an unpleasant inflection or an ugly face could make them sick. It was said of them that they were trying to die, when they decided that the noise or your bad mood or the vibrations in the ether were too much to bear, and they stopped breathing and dropped their heart rate, turning blue or purple. Turn away from the light! the nurses would shout at them, half-joking. All the doors to all the bays were open, and Jemma could see through them that there was hardly a single isolette or crib that didn’t have a person or two administering to the patient. It looked as if every last one of them was trying to die.

As they entered the first bay, a swiftly passing nurse caught Jemma’s shoulder, pulling her a few steps before she stopped. Fat, middle-aged, with

smart hair and stylish glasses, she looked just like countless other nurses. Jemma knew her the way she knew a lot of the nurses in the unit and the nursery—she'd been yelled at by her for touching a baby or not touching a baby or not washing her hands correctly or breathing wrong around the babies. Her name was Judy or Julie or Jolene.

"You, what are you?" she asked.

"A med student."

"Useless! Useless! Have you ever given bicarb before?"

"Not exactly," Jemma said, meaning never at all.

"Well, time to learn!" She shoved a nursing manual and a little phial of bicarbonate into Jemma's hands, pointed at the nearest isolette, and then she was off, swift as before, shouting the dose back over her shoulder. Jemma turned to Rob to ask about the particulars of correcting a metabolic acidosis, but he was gone, collared by an attending to assist with intubating a plum-colored baby down the way. Jemma could look things up as well as anyone, and probably quicker than most. Facts leaked out of her brain within days of being stuffed in, but she had excelled in school all her life because she always knew the most direct route to the information she required. She had the heaviest white coat in her class, full of books and laminated tables, and she wore at her hip the most advanced data-storage device she could find. She read the entry on bicarb in the nursing manual pretty quickly. For the next five minutes she would know as much as anyone about how to give it, and then the information would be gone. She thought she was doing a good job, and was feigning confidence as she drew up the medication and flicked bubbles out of the syringe. Still, the flapping harpy who had assigned Jemma the task made another pass by her just in time to catch her wrist and shriek at her, "It's not going to do much good in her bladder. That's the *foley*, you moron!" It was just one of many pasta-thin tubes disappearing into a tangle beside the little body before emerging to plunge into various natural and unnatural orifices. Jemma had thought she'd traced out the line pretty carefully. Judy—Jemma got a sustained look at her dangling name tag as she was shrieking at her—pushed her out of the way, into the orbit of another nurse, who pressed her into service trying to get IV access on a fat, seizing one-month-old. He was huge and veinless, and had just the appearance of a red beachball, the way he bounced in his bed. "He hasn't seized in a week!" said the new nurse. "We just pulled the broviac yesterday, for God's sake, and the IM ativan isn't working for shit. Are you any good at these?"

"I'm okay," Jemma said, though she'd never in her life gotten an IV on

anyone except Rob, whose veins were as great and obvious as highways. She took a foot while the nurse took a hand, and they both began to stab blindly into the soft red skin. Jemma got a flash of blood once, but when she tried to thread the catheter the little vein blew. "Try again," the nurse told her, and Jemma did, failing three more times before the nurse got one. By then the baby's battery had run down. It was only twitching once or twice a minute.

"Should we still give the drug?" asked the nurse.

"I guess," Jemma said, looking around for a real doctor. Rob was in this bay, doing compressions four isolettes away. She decided not to bother him with the question. The nurse pushed the tranquilizer and they both bent over the isolette to watch its eyes glaze.

"You're a little shaky," said the nurse, when the baby had grown quite still. "You want some of this?" She shook the syringe at her.

"No thanks," Jemma said.

"I'm Anna," the nurse said cheerily, sticking out her hand. "And I'm kidding! Nice try with those pokes, though—seriously." Jemma took her hand weakly and stared at her, not sure what struck her as so strange about the woman, and she thought for a moment it was her chicken neck or her oversized turquoise earrings that gave her the air of a trailer-park queen, until she realized it was the cheery tone, so out of place in this carnival of crises, and in the context of the great crisis. Jemma suddenly understood that she hadn't been thinking about that, about what the broadcast lady was saying—you have all been saved from the water. "Is it real?" she asked Anna.

"One hundred percent genuine prime delicious benzo!" she said, sniffing lovingly at the syringe. "I'm kidding!"

Judy grabbed Jemma's arm and dragged her down the bay, not even speaking to her but delivering her to another access nightmare and then hurrying away again. Jemma picked up a syringe and started poking; the baby's nurse didn't even look up. Jemma failed three times on this one, three on the next one, and two on the next, a post-op cardiac train wreck whose central access stopped working just as the unit went all to hell, and whose irritable heart was wanting its antiarrhythmic. Jemma tried three times and got the fourth, a scalp vein just in the place you'd put a bow on the head of a normal baby girl. Then she got two in a row, both on the first try, but just when she thought she might actually be developing some skill or attracting some luck at inserting IVs, someone wanted her to intubate. She was three bays away from where she started, faced with a former twenty-seven-weeker who, now a month old, and five days off his ventilator, had abruptly decided to stop breathing.

“How many of these have you done before?” the nurse asked her. Jemma said three, which was technically true, but she did not volunteer that none of those attempts had been successful. She knew the procedure well enough, knew how to put a rolled washcloth under the little neck and tilt the head back, how to pry open the toothless mouth with her pinkie and sweep the tongue aside with the edge of the laryngoscope blade. She put her tube in the first hole she saw. “Esophagus,” said the nurse, listening over the belly with a stethoscope as Jemma puffed a few bursts of air through the tube with a bag. “Did it again,” she said, after Jemma’s second try. “Did you say you’d done this before?” Jemma didn’t answer, only rolled the head back again and poised her arm for another swoop. She saw it again, the single pink wet hole, and understood how it wasn’t the anatomy she sought. She wondered how a trachea could be so thoroughly hidden in a neck the diameter of a shot glass. The nurse was shouting out the baby’s heart rate, which fell further and further as Jemma failed to remove the foreign body from its throat. “One ten!” she shrieked. “Ninety! Sixty!” Jemma took out the scope, straightened her back, and took a step back right into Rob.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Intubating this little boy.”

“Trying, anyway,” the nurse said. Rob took the bag and mask from her and ventilated by hand. When Jemma went in again he looked over her shoulder, his cheek pressed to hers. He was covered in sweat. His clothes were soaked through, and Jemma wondered if other people had noticed how he reeked of sex.

“Ah, just pull back a little,” he said, tugging gently at her wrist. The vocal cords popped into view and Jemma went through them with the tube. Rob’s fingers clutched the tube over hers, pinning it against the kicking baby’s lips.

“You’re in, finally,” the nurse said to Jemma.

“Don’t let go till the tube is secure,” said Rob, and then he hurried away. Jemma could not figure how much time had passed since she saw him last, and she quickly lost track again after he was gone. She intubated two more babies, put in another IV, assisted with a chest tube, bag-ventilated for a half hour under the intermittent tutelage of a pierced-up respiratory therapist, and finally changed a diaper, and then she could not find another emergency. Jemma was in the third bay, the middle bay, when it all stopped; she sat down on the floor and leaned back against the wall. She saw Dr. Chandra standing in the middle of the bay, a silver laryngoscope in his hand, looking

forlorn and confused. Natalie and Emma were standing very tall on either side of an isolette three babies down from where Jemma sat, with their heads held high and their noses elevated, so they looked to be sniffing for the next crisis, but it never came. Dr. Grouse, the attending, was standing with his arms folded, seeming to be staring intently at a monitor, but his eyes were closed. The silence of alarms seemed heavy and oppressive, and the noise of a loosely connected piece of oxygen tubing near Jemma's head was rather soothing. She closed her eyes and fell asleep, but only for a few minutes, waking to discover the nurse Anna shaking formula on her from a bottle.

"Wake up, sweetie," she said. "You can't sleep there."

"Stop that," Jemma said.

"It's not too hot, is it?" Anna asked, shaking out a few drops onto her arm.

"What time is it?" Jemma asked.

"I haven't looked. Will you move, or should I roll you out of the way?"

Jemma stood. "What happened?"

"You were here. You saw. They all crumped at once. The whole damn unit, except her." She pointed to an isolette in the middle of the room. It was set upon a dais that Jemma was quite sure hadn't been there the day before. "She auto-extubated an hour ago. How about that? Now they want me to try to feed her. That seems a little hasty, don't you think?"

"I mean outside. What happened outside?"

Anna shrugged. "Ask somebody who's thinking about it," she said, and turned to feed her patient. Jemma walked away from her, to the isolette on the dais. Standing on her toes, she could look inside to see the King's Daughter, sucking on her hand with her rabbity mouth. She turned her head to look serenely at Jemma. It was unbearable, not for the ugliness of her face, but for the peace of her eyes. "Brenda," Anna said. "Isn't that an awful name? She needs a sleeveless tee shirt and bad hair, to go along with that name."

"I have to go," Jemma said—she had a view into all the bays but didn't see Rob anywhere that she looked. She hurried right out of the unit, past the little flocks of people three or four strong, who were finally turning on the televisions set high in the corners of every bay, seeking answers about the state of the world but finding only lambent static.



It takes four angels to oversee an apocalypse: a recorder to make the book that would be scripture in the new world; a preserver to comfort and to save those selected to be the first generation; an accuser to remind them why they suffer; and a destroyer to revoke the promise of survival and redemption, and to teach them the awful truth about furious sheltering grace. And I am the least of these, for though I alone know the whole story of the call that asked for the end of the world and the flood that answered it, and though it falls to me to write the Book of Calvin and the Acts of Jemma and the Book of the King's Daughter, I already know that in the new world no one will read scripture, and they will not labor under the sort of covenant that can be written down in words.

Now we are only two, but two others are coming, our brother and our brother. We are a family, but only in the way every angel is related to every other angel, and nothing but duty binds us. I do not love or hate the angel in the walls of the hospital, who all these stunned survivors are getting to know by name, since they must capture some small part of her bright essence with a name before she can serve them. Ancient and ageless, she never lived or died. I was a special case. Only Metatron was like me, mortal before he was angel. But he went on to be the right hand of God, and I am the imaginary friend Jemma has never even known that she has. Still, he is not really my brother either, though if I ever met him I would call him such, and I was mightier, in my way, than he ever was, or is.

* * *

On their first day at sea I am obligated to dance above the hospital and praise them all, the high and the low, the damned and the elect. I remember lust, and it is like that, to be taken by the urge to dance and praise. I would have railed against it, in my old days, and schemed against it, and destroyed it. Not anymore. It is a joy to submit.

My sister sings with me, though she is trapped in the substance of the hospital, and cannot leave it to dance with me. If she did, it would sink like a stone. I spin in a spiral that echoes the form of the hospital below. Blue sky above and blue sea below and the hospital a white mote between them.

Praise their ignorance, my sister sings.

Praise their fear, I sing.

Praise their hatred.

Praise their envy.

Praise their bitter grief.

Praise them and put them aside.

They are eating the last tainted bread of the earth.

Praise their unhappy fate.

And praise their hours of joy.

Praise their good work.

And praise the sickness of children.

Praise all the tumors.

And praise the bad blood.

Praise the tired livers.

Praise the ailing spleens.

And praise the high colonic ruin.

Praise the drowning waters.

And all the drowned beneath them.

Praise our accusing brother.

Let him rise from the depths.

Praise our destroying brother.

Hurry his ascendance.

Praise Rob Dickens.

May he lend Jemma his strength.

Praise Jemma!

Mother of all!

Praise Jemma!

To the edge of the new world!
Praise Jemma!
The most important girl!
My dance is a blessing!
Our song is a prophecy!
Let her win!
Let her triumph!
The redeemer after the reformer!
Praise her in her whole!
And praise her in her parts!
Praise them in their whole!
And praise them in their parts!

Praise them! we sing, a command to the sky, and to ourselves. And I wonder as I speak half the names of the survivors, oldest down to youngest, praising all the while with my heart as well as my voice, if I ever loved like this when I was still alive, when it was not, as it is now, an obligation of my nature, and a condition of my being. Then the song is over, and I lie on the still-forbidden roof in an attitude of sleep, exhausted by passion, feeling disappointed and empty, and wondering what I was so excited about.

Like lust, I say, and do you see how it is true.



Jemma's best friend Vivian joined the crew, dressed in goggles and surgical overalls insulated with pillow stuffing and led by Jordan Sasscock, the PICU senior, that tried to break through the glass doors of the lobby with a bench. It was the sort of bench, built from heavy wrought iron and laminated wood, that would have been more at home in a park than in a lobby, but it nicely approximated a battering ram just when they needed one. While a big crowd watched from the railings of the atrium balconies, they lifted it all together and ran at the doors that weren't doors any longer, but had become, while they were all distracted by the sudden lurch toward death taken by every last patient in their care, one flat panel of glass, as dark as slate and yet if you stood close and stared long enough into it, you saw your own face deep within, not exactly reflected. When Vivian looked she thought of a girl swimming up from the depths of a cold mountain lake.

She didn't know what she expected to see, on the other side of the shattered glass. Maybe the city on fire, or all the buildings fallen down. Or maybe just a group of soggy policemen. "We've been knocking for hours," they would say. Something had happened—that much she certainly believed. You could not feel that violent disjointment which had unsettled her off her feet, and unsettled the kids out of their tenuous grasp on health, and think otherwise. But a new ocean, and them in the hospital the only survivors? They were more likely experiencing some cruel experiment—black out the

windows and blow in some aerosolized LSD and get Phyllis Diller to hide somewhere with a microphone and claim to be a sweet, creepy angel—than the end of the world.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” said the voice, seeming to come from everywhere in the lobby, loud but not stern.

“Fuck you!” said Maggie Formosa, one of Vivian’s classmates, and easily the worst person she knew. Jordan counted to three and they ran. She was thinking of her family as she ran, imagining, stupidly she knew, that they were all waiting on the other side of the glass, lined up with hundreds of others behind a police barrier that separated this strangely behaving hospital from the usual city.

“You will live!” the voice shouted at them, and something about the tone of the voice betrayed it to Vivian as at once utterly compassionate and utterly deceitful, and in the scant moments before they collided with the glass it managed to convince her not that they were going to live but that the world had well and truly ended, and that they had been thrust beyond an ultimate pale into a strange and horrible new world.

She alone of the six was prepared for the hard shock that assaulted their shoulders when they ran the bench into the unbreakable glass, but she fell back with all of them, and just like Maggie she nearly missed having her foot crushed by one of the legs of the bench. But while Maggie stomped her feet and shouted at the highest window, the black glass cap of the atrium, Vivian sat on the ground and drew her face to her knees and wept, just like anyone who believes all of a sudden in the proximity of angels, and the death of her family, and the end of the world.

“I am the preserving angel,” said the voice. “Did you think I would let you hurt yourself?”



“It all started,” the man told Jemma, “with the voice from my fireplace.” They were climbing the stairs, on their way to the roof, to look out on the state of creation. It was one day since the hospital had been cast adrift, and she was trying very hard not to consider things. It had become immediately apparent to her that the disaster—if that was a great enough word for it, if there was a great enough word for it—had spawned two types of people: those who considered things, and those who did not. There were only a few of the latter; she and this man seemed to be two of them. When she tried to think of the dead she only saw her own four, their faces flashing in succession, or the four of them standing quietly in a bright room, or the four of them adrift on the new great ocean, hand in hand in hand in hand, arms and legs spread so they made a wide rosette, spinning just under the surface of the water with their eyes open and bubbles caught beneath their chins.

When she’d finally made it back to the call room, after listening over and over, always disbelievingly, to the hidden lady—where the hell was she? everyone kept asking—who told them over and over that they had been preserved from a world-wide deluge, after she’d given up trying to peer through the windows, after she’d had a clutching reunion with Vivian, and after she’d tired of the organizing chaos all over the hospital, she’d found Rob there, laid out crookedly on his belly in the little bed, weeping into his arms. Jemma stretched herself over him, reaching past his head to take his

hands. "Something awful has happened," he told her again. "It's not a trick or a drill. It's something more horrible than anything that's ever even happened before."

"I know," she said, because she had suffered enough disasters to know a real one from a fake one. But she could think of no words that might comfort him. It would have been enough, she thought, to weep with him, but she could not even do that. She felt very little except pain at his pain. What if it were true, that the world, as the grating voice insisted, was drowned and the only survivors were those who were trapped within the round walls of this hospital. She thought something in her should balk at believing it, but nothing did. She was so used to getting horrible news, she never doubted anything bad: your brother is dead; your father has died; your mother was in that burning house; Martin has had an accident; of course, of course, of course, of course. Only good news ever seemed unreal to her, anymore, and the fact of all those ended lives—a comical voice numbered them in her head, billy-uns and billy-uns and billy-uns—only put in her a familiar stony feeling, that left her calm and alert, so she thought as she listened to Rob's titanic weeping that she could discern the four distinct sobbing tones. She could name the muscles that shifted her to and fro as she rode on his back. She could track the progress of his tears down his face despite the dim light, and mark the tiny increments by which the tear stain grew on the festive sheet. She knew this state of being, her funeral mode—now time would slow down and stop and she would feel, would know, that this was the essence and purpose of her whole life, to be somebody leftover, when all the good people, the neat people, the cool people, the people who were actually people and not crawly depressive lizards, were dead, and to feel nothing about it, except the same old stony feeling and the not gnawing but nibbling suspicion that she had missed out, again. She put her face in his neck and said them again, empty words: "I know."

"I thought it was the devil talking, at first," the man told her. "Who else would speak out of the ashes? It was a cold night, but I had no fire going, so the voice came out of the blackness. It said, Listen to me, creature. I am an angel of the Lord. He has decreed a work for you."

Jemma had not asked him to explain anything; he had just started talking as soon as they'd met. He was coming up the stairs to the first floor just as she was entering the stairwell. They stood and regarded each other for a moment. She saw a haggard-looking man in a green suit and terribly ugly shoes, little slippers of woven leather afflicted with beaded tassels on either front.

"Is it... flooded down there?" she had asked him, looking over the railing at the stairs going down; she counted ten flights before they disappeared into darkness. She had taken the stairs to the nursery a hundred times; there hadn't used to be a basement.

"Certainly not," he said. He stared at her, not creepily. There was not much creepy about him, for all that he looked like a hospital administrator or a mortician. His stare was merely frank and curious, open and honest.

"I'm going up to the roof," she told him, when he kept staring at her. It was all over the hospital, announced by rumor and by the voice of the telephone lady who claimed to be an angel, that the roof was off limits, that the stairs were locked and the windows blacked for a very important reason—that what lay outside was so awful that to look at it would cost a person her sanity. "It is not yet time," the lady said. "It is forbidden." But Jemma had sneaked away from the new, expanded duties with which Rob kept himself busy to go and look. She had searched on three different floors for an open door to the stairwell, bumping shoulders with people going about frantic hospital business on the big ramp that ran in a spiral up the center of the hospital and led to every floor, and was the only way to get from one ward to another while the elevators were off-line. She walked around the lobby, stopping before the place where the main doors had been, pausing under the big toy, a giant perpetual-motion machine built to amuse visitors. She tried to appear innocent, looking up into the wires and beams and struts and gears and parachutes, watching the bowling balls leap from basket to basket, the water running in the sluices and the iron sailboats racing in the high courses—the thing had changed with the rest of the hospital, getting twice as complex as it had been before, and twice as stupid, and now it gave Jemma twice as bad a headache to stare at it, but she feigned interest until she was sure no one was looking before she darted to the doors. Every door in the lobby was locked, but she found a way into the stairwell in the now empty ER, suddenly the quietest place in the hospital since every child there had been admitted upstairs. There was no one there to hear her kicking the door and rattling the handle. "There you go," said the mechanical lady, when the handle finally turned. "I thought it was forbidden," Jemma said, looking around for the source of the voice—sometimes she spoke out of speakers but sometimes the voice just came out of a blank wall. "Hello?" Jemma said, but the lady didn't answer.

"That's where the stairs go," said the man. "Up."

"I want to see what it looks like."

"I can tell you what it looks like," he said. "It looks like a lot of water."

"I want to see."

He shrugged.

"How do *you* know, anyway? I thought nobody was allowed to look."

"I haven't," he said. "I don't need to. I just know, like I know the windows will go transparent again in about fifteen minutes. You may as well stay down here and wait. It's a lot of stairs."

"If you know so much, tell me why the elevators don't work." She tried to look skeptical, but knew she probably just looked confused.

"Oh, they will. In about an hour." He looked at his watch and counted past hours on his fingers, his lips moving silently. "Sorry, hour and a half. More or less."

"Right," she said, not convinced. "Who the hell are you, anyway, that you know all this shit?"

"I'm the person who built this place. Well, maybe not built it. But I designed it." He struck a pose, throwing his hands up to the right of his face and splaying his fingers, as if to say, See? Jemma recognized the gesture, and suddenly thought she recognized the man.

"Do I know you? I think I know you."

"I've never seen you before in my life," he said.

But she did know him, because she subscribed to a silly architecture magazine, and had spent idle moments, when she ought to have been studying, gazing at all the marvelous residences, imagining herself sprawled out in every one of the over-appointed rooms, without a care in the world. It was only three or four issues since she had seen this man and his buildings, and remembered especially a giant seaside house he'd built for an eccentric cat-food magnate. Who could forget the many vast rooms—the long hall containing a little forest of rare-wood scratching posts, the thousand square-foot cat-condominium, the long troughs of litter in the chambre de toilette, scented, the captions said, with cardamom and myrrh—all of it as empty of cats as the other fantastic houses always were of people? Jemma hated cats, and remembered the house partly because it seemed so egregious and stupid, and because she remembered the picture of this man, standing outside the cat-palace, striking that very same pose that said, See what I did?

"What's your name?"

"John Grampus," he said, starting up the stairs. Jemma followed him.

"I'm Jemma."

"Who cares? You could be anybody. It doesn't matter, as long as you have

ears to listen. I used to be forbidden to tell about it. I used to get my ass kicked every time I tried.”

“Forbidden?”

“Uh huh. But not anymore. I thought I was going crazy, of course. There are... were... a lot of crazies in my family. Everyone was crazy—two of my sisters, my uncle and my aunt and creepy Cousin Alex, my grandfather, my great grandfather, my great-great grandfather—there’s a fine tradition of suicide there. And my mother—she lost her mind one day in the supermarket. She heard the bread talking. It kept saying, Save me, Oh please save me from this life, and Mama always said it had *a voice like an angel*, so you can imagine how I worried when that voice came from beneath the ashes.

“She told me that seven miles of water were coming to drown all flesh, and that I had been chosen to build what would be the vessel of salvation for a chosen few. Even after I started to believe it, I wanted nothing to do with the idea, let alone the... commission. What sort of fucking lunatic would want to deal with that kind of shit? Not me. I was never even a very religious person, not in the way you think. I was a treeist, really, you know? I met every Saturday with a group of people who had found very spiritual connections with trees. Some people could go all over the place, any old species would do, but I only felt it with an aspen. I’d put my hands on it and rest my head against the bark and then it always happened. Wham! A great peace.

“I did not want the world to end, and I wanted no part of any plan that would bury all the nice people of the earth, not to mention every last aspen, under seven miles of water. Not everybody’s a moron, after all, or a cruel motherfucker, though there are a lot of those out there, and I’ve dated enough of them. But you can’t blame me for hesitating, can you?”

“No,” Jemma said. She was thinking, we are floating on top of seven miles of new ocean. She tried to imagine the bodies of all the lost, already buoyant with decay. Surely they would cover the water from horizon to horizon. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to see them, but still she only saw her four. With great clarity she could see her mother’s long hair slowly lashing the faces of the others.

“But you do not say no to an angel. No, you do not. Mind you, it took a while for me to even take the situation seriously, to believe it was real. For many days I pretended like I didn’t hear a thing, though every night she came and spoke from the fireplace. And when I tried to flee the fireplace, she would speak out of the blackness of sewer grates, or from within black cups of coffee. When I finally decided I wasn’t crazy, after all—when I decided it

was actually happening—I said I couldn’t do it, that I wouldn’t do it. That made her angry. I shouldn’t have made her angry.”

They passed the third floor. Jemma stumbled but John bore her up. She opened her eyes again, and considered the feeling that was in her, and decided that when she saw all the bodies floating, an enormous grief would be written on that blank feeling. It said something terrible about a person, that they had to pretend to grieve at the end of the world. Good Rob Dickens wept not just for his mother and his sisters, but for all the dead, every single creature. When Jemma held him she pressed her face close to his to steal his tears, so when he blinked at her so sadly he would think she was crying, too.

“Can I tell you what happened next? Maybe it’s rude. Maybe that part is still a secret.” He looked up the stairwell, then glared at the cinderblocks in the wall. “Do you care?” he asked, almost shouting, and it took a moment for Jemma to realize he wasn’t talking to her. There was no answer. “I doubt it,” he continued. “I doubt she cares. Well, I was in my living room when I defied her. She was speaking from the fireplace, and when I said no, go get yourself another sucker—actually I said, Go get yourself another sucker, bitch—she said, Stupid creature! in this voice that was so different from before, full of doom but somehow kind of... attractive. She rushed out of the fireplace and ravished me. I don’t know how else to put it. It was sexual. Oh no! Oh yes! I didn’t want it to happen. I don’t even like women, not in that way, be they angel or mortal. I don’t like to look at them. I don’t like to touch them. I don’t like them at all. And why, oh why would I be interested in one of *those* when all my life I suspected that they were gateways to endless, horrible darkness. Wet, sucking, fishy darkness in an empty cave. I had a dream once where I was attacked by a flying horde of them—they were like bats, flapping all around me, and they bit me with tiny little needle teeth and all I could think was, Now I need a rabies shot. But I did it like I’d been waiting for it all my life. It was sort of sexual and then totally sexual—she was this roiling blackness, with no fishy smell at all. I kept waiting for that. She was so black it hurt my eyes to look at her—I felt this weird pressure, like the darkness was pulling on my eyes, pulling and releasing them and pulling and releasing them, and it hurt. She pulled at me all over, and released me, and pulled. Is this getting gross?”

Jemma nodded.

“Well, when she took me I saw the futility of resistance. The new flood would happen, with or without me. There were others who could do what I could do, though not as well. I thought, I had better do it, since I was

damned if I didn't, and maybe—is this too vain?—if I did it things would be better for the people who were going to live. I'm not a nobody, after all. Anybody else's hospital would not be mine, and probably not as good. Would anybody else think to do the sur-basins in teak? Would anybody else put in a star chamber? Would anybody else have a fake perpetual-motion machine that turns into a real perpetual-motion machine? Maybe it was a sign, how I could already see in my mind how the rooms would unfold out of each other. When she was done with me, I wanted to do it for her, anyway. Because though she had hurt me I found myself suddenly but undeniably in love with her. Does that make sense?"

"Not really," said Jemma softly.

"Well, I didn't think it would. I can hardly expect you to understand. Maybe somebody else will. There are a lot of people in this hospital. Almost as many as I hoped for."

"Seven miles?" she said. They were passing the fourth floor, but she was not out of breath because they were proceeding so slowly, each of them pausing before each step as if actively considering if it was truly wise to go on.

"Seven miles. That was the plan."

"That's *impossible*," she said.

"Nothing is impossible for Him." He raised a finger next to his face to point straight up. "That's what she said. He made this earth. Why shouldn't He be able to drown it?"

"Not again," Jemma said. "He said he wouldn't." Never again. Never ever. It was a fact remembered from her third-grade religion class. Sister Gertrude had related to her and her classmates the horrors of the flood, insisting they imagine the agony of the sinners as they drowned. Drowning was one of the worst ways to die, she had said, because you know it's coming, but you can do nothing to stop it. She had made them all hold their breath for as long as they could. "Don't you dare breathe!" she had shrieked at Jemma, when a little whistling sigh escaped from between her lips. "The waters are pressing down on you!" And after she had brought a few of them to tears at the absolute hideousness of it all, and filled them with a nauseating fear of God, she had thrown wide the classroom curtains and pointed at the rainbow with which she had synchronized her lecture. "Never again, children!" she cried, with genuine joy on her face. "Never again!" While the class giggled or wept with relief Jemma had vomited a morning snack of chocolate milk down her jumper.

"Yes," he said. "Those were my words exactly. I even got a Bible and

pointed it out to her. She didn't argue. She didn't even respond. But I learned pretty soon that nothing would be like it was before. I do not know why. Because she called me a prophet, I thought I would be forced to rush out like a madman and warn of the coming flood, but in fact I was forbidden to do so. Of course, I tried right away to tell everybody I could. I knew better already than to talk back to her, at this point, but I was thinking, Fuck you, lady, I'll tell anybody I want! I tried to tell my dad, on the telephone, not caring if he thought I was crazy. I only wanted him to be safe, never mind how he made me take piano for fourteen years and made me do that stupid fucking pinewood derby thing every year, though I always lost, and always cried, and he called me pussy-face every time, and not just over the derby. Did I skin my knee? Pussy-face! No date for the prom? Pussy-face! Not distinguished enough for Yale? Pussy-face! What sort of father calls his kid that? It didn't matter. All was forgiven, everybody was going to die. But when I tried to tell him, I couldn't even form the words. I was physically unable to speak. She knew I had tried and she punished me, but when she was done she became very tender and... sticky. And she said to me, You may only tell the children.

"Because the whole thing was for the kids, right?" he said, and paused. They had passed the fifth floor, and were halfway to the sixth. Jemma noticed that the numbers that marked the floors were different from before—they were bigger and the colors were deeper. They shined at the surface like they were still wet, or like the surface of puddles. She put her hand against the 5 as they passed it, expecting her hand to sink into the bright yellow paint. It was solid and smooth, and made her hand tingle. "That was my job," he said, "to design a hospital for sick kids. But not just a hospital—it would be a wonderful new machine for which the angel would become the soul and the mind, the intellect and the will. Not that I had ever designed a hospital before. Or a computer, for that matter—that's where she lives, in the last basement. Way, way, way down, in the computer core. When I said I couldn't do it, she asked me, Where is your faith, creature? Where is your trust in the Lord your God? Lost up my ass, bitch, I said, but she knew that I was the bitch, and I would do anything she told me to, and believe whatever she told me, and try my hardest for her because she was becoming the most important person in my life. Sure enough, within a month the hospital people called me right out of the blue to offer me the commission, and when I sat down to do it, it just sort of happened. It was all inspiration. And even though I didn't understand where it came from, I understood it when it passed through my hand. Fantastic shit, *crazy* shit—I can hardly describe it, but you'll see it working.

When the construction began I visited the site every night with her, hidden in her darkness, and she executed miracle after miracle, building all the secret holy parts of the building while I directed her from a second, secret set of plans, that only she and I ever saw. For once she did as *I* told *her*, and I swear she didn't understand how most of what she was building actually worked, but I did. I got it." He tapped a finger against his head. "It all just sort of rose up. I got proud. She punished me."

He ran his hand along the wall as they passed the doorway to the seventh floor. "Oh, the whole place is a miracle," he said. "I could bore you with all the miracles. Dry as a bone, even in the deepest cellars. Replicators—have you seen those yet?—that can make anything out of anything. You were wondering, weren't you, how we're supposed to eat? Wait until you see! Apples out of old shoes; shoes out of shit; movies out of just an idea. Wait till you try that. It's like humming a few bars and then getting the whole song played back to you, but you tell her a couple lines of a story and she gives you back the whole thing, just as you would have imagined it, if only you weren't too depressed, or too dull. Every day there was some new incredible thing to conceive and build. I started thinking of the people who would come—I could almost see you all, and understand how horrible it was going to be, but it was up to me to make it a little bit better. I am to be the preserver and the comforter, she told me—a load of shit. It was me. I was doing it all. She was just the fucking wrench. Night after night after night of miracles. I didn't want to ever finish because I knew what would come after we were done.

"All this miraculous shit," he said, throwing out his arms in a gesture meant to take in the whole hospital, "all to save the kids. I don't have any kids, but if I did, you can bet they would be here. No nieces or nephews, either. I would have brought them, too. As it was, I warned as many children as I could. You have to believe me. They were the only ones I could tell. I would go to playgrounds and lean over the fence to talk to a child, and I could speak. I'd say what was coming, and sometimes they would listen, and sometimes they were old enough to understand what I was saying, but none of them took me seriously. The small ones thought I was telling a story, the bigger ones told me I was crazy. And a grown man cannot go talking to children in a playground without arousing suspicions. There are those signs, right? No adults allowed without the company of a child. But I couldn't stop until I had gotten at least one to say he would go to the hospital if an unusually heavy and persistent rain should begin to fall. Children complained to their parents

about the strange man in the park. There was a trip to the police station. One boy did say he would go, when the time came. That was something.” They had passed the eighth and ninth floors, the signs sea green and sky blue.

“I thought it would come sooner, you know. This hospital has been operating for what—a year? I had all that time to fret. I thought maybe it wouldn’t happen, though she never left me, and she always said it would indeed happen, that it would be swift and ferocious, not like last time where it just sort of drizzled a warning for days and days while everybody went on burning their children and fucking their poodles. And it was pretty ferocious, wasn’t it? Well, here we are.”

They stood at the bottom of the last flight of stairs, looking up at the door to the roof. “Still want your look?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. Seven miles, she was thinking. Hah! But even inside her head the exclamation sounded weak and full of doubt. John Grampus went up the stairs and threw the door open. It was dark on the other side, and Jemma wondered if it was night already until she realized that the door did not lead directly outside. He threw a switch on the wall beyond the door and lit up an enormous room. The walls and roof were made of glass, but they were darkened like all the windows below. The place was full of plants and flowers, some that Jemma recognized—fig trees and ferns and roses and mums and daisies and irises in lacquered pots—and some that she didn’t, strange tall flowers that looked vaguely like orchids, and short plants with succulent leaves as long as her finger. They shivered when she bent to touch one.

“We’re in the greenhouse,” he said, closing the door and punching a button on the wall. There were buttons all over the place, now. She had spent two weeks in this hospital, slave to the whims of cruel nurses, a fetch-monkey for attendings and residents—they’d sent her all over on unimportant missions of busywork, and she’d wandered, herself, bored and lonely, despite her exhaustion too nervous to sleep in between deliveries. She was familiar with the whole place, so all the new buttons and switches and consoles in the walls were shocking to her. Looking for an open door to the stairs, she had noticed that the halls were wider everywhere, the ceiling was higher, and the place was full of new corridors and doors and rooms—the whole hospital had expanded as if it had taken a huge, deep breath.

“Ready?” he asked. She did not respond, but he threw open the door anyway, and it so happened that they were standing just in front of the sun, and when the light hit her eyes she cried out and closed them.

“Easy now,” he said. “I have sunglasses, but not for you. Didn’t you think

it might be sunny? Here, I'll guide you." He took her by the elbow and drew her out into air which felt crisp and bright against her skin. She didn't breathe at first because she feared the air would be full of the miasma of wet rot, but when she breathed the air was sweet. "I wonder why it isn't colder," he said, "since we're so high up. I wonder why we aren't choking, for that matter. Go ahead and open your eyes."

Jemma shut her eyes tighter, considering things. Maybe it was enough, just to have come up here. Maybe she should just turn around and hurry back down the stairs. She probably did not really want to see all the bodies, their agony still obvious on their faces, whatever cruel seabirds had survived nesting in their hair and lazily pecking at the ripe eyeballs of their hosts, and it would probably be better to hold on to that blank feeling, an old friend, after all. She should be a sensible person for once and realize that she did not want to see the water, seven miles deep over the whole unfortunate world. It would all remain impossible, after all, until she opened her eyes.

Years before, Vivian—back then still a new friend but the closest thing she had to family—had walked her up the aisle, past the rows of folding chairs draped with hideous velvet slipcovers, and the calla lilies flowering in an obscene corridor on either side of her feet. For the tenth time that day she thought how the calla lily must be the nastiest flower ever, and wished again that someone would outlaw it. Faces turned to watch her as she passed, people crying or whispering. She would not turn to look at them directly. A trick of her peripheral vision made the heads seem like they were waving on stalks or bobbing on strings. Jemma leaned heavily on her friend. Funeral number four, she thought. I should be good at this, by now.

Martin's mother was waiting with him, dressed in a black sequined dress that might have been matronly if not for the hip-high slit that revealed her aged but shapely leg. She leaned against the coffin like a crooning dame against a piano. As people paused to look in she would touch their hands or faces with her own hand. "Isn't he beautiful, Jemma?" she asked, when Jemma came near enough to see in. He was not beautiful anymore. The mortician had failed to restore the symmetry of his face ruined in the crash, and in trying to hide the bruising on his face had only succeeded in tarting him up horrifically. His staring eyes were the worst thing, stitched open so he could, as his mother requested, see into eternity. "Kiss him goodbye, darling," his mother said. "One last time, honey."

"Don't do it," Vivian whispered, but Jemma did. She bent closer and closer, seeking to reconcile this face with the living boy she had loved. He stared

past her. Before she kissed his lips she saw how they were parted slightly, and how thick the thread was, twine really, that bound his mouth and kept his jaw from dropping down to his chest. A coldness went into her when she touched her lips to his, and the feeling, a great heaviness, centered in her belly, as if she had eaten a boulder.

“Kiss me, too, darling,” said his mother, reaching for her and blinking through her tarry mascara. Before she could grab her Vivian stepped ahead and absorbed the awful embrace. Her lover’s mother seemed not to notice. She wept ecstatically, and seemed not to hear when Vivian said, “There, there you horrible beast.” Jemma stepped back and watched as the elfin mortician turned a little crank set at one end of the coffin, and the lid slowly closed. She looked back and forth between Martin’s face and the mortician’s ears. Twin eruptions of white hair poured out of them, like little clouds of steam that belied the fixed waxy friendliness of his expression. As the lid fell further down, and the crack grew smaller, she bent at the waist to peer in a final time, not knowing why she did, because it only made the heavy feeling heavier, every second longer she looked at the face. A final bit of light gleamed in his soulless eye. She thought she saw him wink, and then the coffin was closed.

“I shouldn’t have looked,” she said to Vivian.

“I fucking told you,” she said gently, guiding her back to her seat. Jemma had closed her eyes and not opened them yet, and did not open them through the rest of the ceremony. While Father Dover spoke false praise about her lover—wasn’t he patient, wasn’t he peaceful, wasn’t he a gentle boy?—she watched the dead face stare past her, and felt the heaviness in her get weightier, as if the stone she’d eaten was dividing in her, pounds into pounds, and she felt sure she’d never move again.

“Open your eyes,” said John. Jemma had them shut so tight that the muscles at her temples were twitching and she was getting a headache.

“I don’t want to see it,” she said. She held out her hand at him. “I changed my mind. Take me back down.”

“You’ll see it anyway. Listen, it’s starting now.” Above the wind she could hear a faint whooshing noise that sounded precisely like a heart murmur. It grew louder and harsher as she listened. She was bad at murmurs, but found herself quite readily classifying this one—high pitched, rumbling, holosystolic—the hospital had aortic stenosis. The building moved under her feet, and she cried out as she fell, opening her eyes and throwing her hands behind her to break her fall.

“See?” he said. “It’s far more horrible than it looks.” Jemma shaded her

eyes with one hand and looked out ahead. The roof had changed since the last time she'd sneaked up here. Previously a wide space of concrete with a few well-tended planters, now it was all grass and gardens—a huge tree was growing on the other side, reaching out of a crowd of bushes and benches and plants. Jemma was standing in the middle of a field of soft grass, surrounded by a little road that ran the circumference of the roof. Beyond the edge there was only blue water, no bodies or birds or bobbing detritus. The hospital was spinning—that was why she'd fallen.

“What's happening?” she asked.

“An adjustment,” he said proudly. “The windows are clearing—I told you they would. Some hallways are lengthening while others contract, just a little. The carpets are growing thicker. The hospital is still preparing, becoming what we need it to be. It's nothing to be afraid of.”

She rose unsteadily, climbing up the man's side—he seemed quite sure of his footing. They spun in a brisk arc. Jemma saw the same thing no matter how far the hospital turned her: a calm flat blue that stretched to a line where it changed its shade almost imperceptibly and became the sky. It should not have been beautiful, but she found it to be so. She imagined quite vividly the horrors masked by that insouciant blue surface, and tried so hard to feel a crushing grief, but only the heavy feeling came, filling her up and rooting her to the spot, so she stood firm even as the hospital stopped its rotation and turned the other way, then stopped again and began to move forward, as if it had suddenly become certain of its direction. It gathered speed, so Jemma's hair flew back above her head and her eyes and nose burned from the cold wind. She looked away from the water and sky to study John's face. He'd lifted his glasses to look toward the horizon. She thought her face must look like his, blank but not calm. “It's so blue,” he said.

“Where are we going?” she asked him anxiously, finally registering the very determined way the hospital was moving through the water.

“You know as well as I do,” he said, and shrugged. “She never told me what would happen next.”