

In Her Affliction

There must have been something before this, but the woman cannot remember. It seems like she has always been here, and will always be here, in this pitiless, mechanical womb.

She must be breech, a footling, because her feet are poking out into the cold, indifferent nothing, while her head remains swaddled, immobile. Someone had told her not to move. She can't remember who, or why, but she is trying to follow instructions.

The womb is earsplitting and changeable. And it is cruel, bearing down with its noise on her forehead and ears, like a jackhammer into her skull. Then it coughs loudly and rhythmically, like a diseased, wheezing bird. For awhile she's inside an old-fashioned telephone that vibrates and won't stop ringing.

She opens her eyes. Perhaps she is not supposed to, but she really wants to know what she might see. She sees a tiny screw an inch above her eye, holding together a thick white mask of plastic. She sees her tiny world as if through the holes in a goalie mask.

If she has always been here, how would she know what a goalie mask is, or how an old-fashioned telephone sounds? How could she have a friendship bracelet, which she knows is on her wrist because it is damp with sweat and because the loose ends tickle her skin if she does not remain absolutely still?

She is starting to remember. She seems to have memories of lilacs and their damp, fragrant petals. She has memories of laughing in bed, and of a child suckling her breast.

A cool breeze of recycled air blows across her tired face. Perhaps she should stay here forever. She is frightened of what's outside. Of what the machine will insist that she know. Of what she has lost, and will lose.

For a moment, her whole world goes silent. The machine is quiet and still. She can't hear any voices. What if she's been forgotten? The doctors and nurses have all gone home, leaving her here to wonder. What if there is a fire? Or a flood? What will she do when the waters rush in to claim her as part of their wreckage?

But her foot is asleep. Her ears are ringing. And, of course, she has an itch. On her face, just below her left nostril. Even if she was allowed to, she could not reach it. She was given a panic button, in case of an emergency. But is an itch an emergency? And she feels that if she pushes the button, something unspeakably terrible will happen.

But what, she has to wonder, could be more terrible than this? The world having ended and her stuck, lying here? *If anyone's out there*, she thinks, *I will push it*. So she stills her breathing and waits. A cough. A curse. A shuffling foot. If there's any small sign of life outside, she will keen, she will wail, she will puncture their eardrums. And she will demand that she be delivered.

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