

ON A
SCALE
OF 1
TO
10

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TO MY MAMA

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THEN

The two girls had been drinking since three, a swig for every crash of the river. The Golden Virginia they were smoking like shriveled worms falling out of rolling paper. They tried to blow rings in the sticky air.

Failing.

Giggling.

Heads spinning. Could be the alcohol, could be the heat.

Now it was late, and the sky was pale pink, like the smooth inside of a conch. Cans of cider glinted in the grass and trees flopped like vast ivory wigs, heavy from the weeks of rain. Henna patterned the girls' bare arms, a memory of windswept festivals bleeding color.

The blonde girl swigged.

The second girl made daisy chains the lengths of her legs. She picked them up and threw them into the river, where they floated like tiny lilies. A crow leered over a piece of over-grilled bacon discarded from a barbecue. It squawked, its black eyes shining. The girls talked.

The first girl beckoned to the surging river ahead of them, brown and black and foaming. They laughed. The second girl nodded.

Their fingers interlocked in a drunken clasp and they swayed as they stood up. They didn't put any shoes on. The dam in front of them shouted.

"We're such idiots," said the blonde girl.

"Such idiots."

They stumbled over soapy tangles of moss and their calves turned pink with the cold. The branches of a dead tree sprawled like bones and the blonde girl's faded lilac streaks echoed the sunset.

“Jump, Iris,” she said. “I’ll follow you.”

NOW

The first thing they do at Lime Grove is try to make me talk about the monster.

Dr. Flores and a nurse in a blue uniform, trying to hollow out the small scraps of truth, asking me one hundred questions in one hundred different ways in the hope that one will catch me out.

How did the self-harming start?

Will you tell us what happened?

You know your behavior isn't normal, don't you?

Let us help you.

Only you can help yourself.

How do you feel? On a scale of one to ten?

I don't talk. The monster won't let me. The room is decorated in a painful pink palette: cracked pink walls, pink metal cupboards, pink leather armchairs, and a forlorn-looking fuchsia beanbag chair in a corner. The sign on the door says it is THERAPY ROOM 1, which is stupid because I didn't see a Therapy Room 2 or 3 and this doesn't feel like therapy. Denim cradles my thighs but I'm shivering at the knees and my hair is dripping more grease than a deep-fat fryer. Angry spots have swollen around my lips. I don't know why.

Dr. Flores scribbles something down on his notepad, holding it at an angle so I can't read his spindly writing.

"Sorry, we have to take notes," he says. "It's standard practice."

Dr. Flores is lanky but short in all the wrong places. He chews his pen lid like gum and is wearing a three-piece suit, a stripy purple shirt, and a periodic table tie that knots

perfectly around helium. He is wearing scratched, thick-rimmed glasses and lots of hair gel, which makes him look like a hedgehog. I get the impression he doesn't like me, but maybe it's just easier to distance yourself from the fate of a patient if you don't like them and they don't like you.

The nurse reeks of newly qualified. Her blue uniform is creased and new, her smile molded like clay.

“Let's have a think about how you felt when—”

“When can I go home?” My voice cracks more than I want it to.

“You have to stay here for an assessment.”

“Assessment of what?”

Dr. Flores looks down at the bandages wrapped around my arm, the small, round Band-Aid where the cannula had pierced my hand, the bruise on my neck that looks like dark wine, and it's his turn not to answer.

“What happened to Iris?” he asks instead.

After an hour, he stops asking.

If you really want to know everything, the first thing I'll probably tell you is that growing up I lived in paradise and

then it was shattered when I moved to the town with the smoke and the cars and the people and the identical rows of redbrick houses and the oppressive gray skies, but I barely remember that, and that's not why I'm mad.



I'm taken down a dim, strip-lit corridor, with numbered doors on either side. Some of the doors are brightly decorated with posters of names and KEEP OUT signs. We stop outside the door with the number 4 on it and a viewing slit above it. Inside is a bed with pale-green blankets, a scratchy navy carpet, bare walls, a wardrobe, and a chair. It's white-washed, with one lime-green wall. Who chooses lime green? A whiteboard above the bed and pens in primary colors. Maybe they think I'll write out everything that happened. I imagine it in bloodred, a headstone looming over my pillow.

Two more blue nurses watch me strip to my underwear and scan my body with metal detectors and no regard for

dignity. They press stodgy fingers into the lining of my bra and sit on my bed to shake out the contents of my bag into metal trays. I think I can call it my bed, anyway. You aren't allowed pens. Too sharp. You aren't allowed makeup or perfume or drawstrings on trousers or laces on shoes. I can see them glancing at my arms: shiny, raw layers of scar tissue over scar tissue and a few wet cuts. They leave me half a bagful of shitty magazines and one rogue cigarette filter.

I get into bed in my underwear. One of the nurses sits in the open doorway reading a magazine. One-to-one—it's a nice term for suicide watch. I'm not going to be left alone.

I stare at the red light on the ceiling and listen to the nurse turning pages.

I can't get comfortable on the slippery sheets. The curtains, held up by magnets, flutter even though there's no breeze, and the green light from the corridor keeps me forgetting I am in a hospital. Nurses beep in and out of the office next door with a swipe of cards. Distant humming from the motorway. Sirens. Coughing from the nurse in the

doorway. Cups of tea coming and going. Envelopes being opened. Whispered conversations.

Rain starts to scratch at the window, and Iris is everywhere. I can see her in the fluttering of the curtains. I can hear her in the rain, and when I close my eyes I can feel her breath on my neck, her arms on my back, her hands around my throat. Her fingernails digging into the palms of my hands. I stumble out of bed with Iris clinging to my ankles, and the nurse gives me two oval sleeping pills. Then I manage to get rid of Iris, until the storm is over and tomorrow begins.



I wake to sharp light. A new nurse is sitting on the chair facing me.

She's short and plump, with dyed dark-red hair that has a sort of mercilessly straightened quality about it. For a while I watch her, still lying in the cocoon I have made for myself, as she flicks quietly through "My husband ate our baby!" in

bubble writing. On the floor next to her is a clipboard and an observation sheet.

I sit up. She turns to me.

“Morning,” she says brightly. Too brightly. “I’m Emma.” She has a faint accent, Scottish, it might be.

I smile awkwardly. That’s a thing about me: I’m awkward, I think. I always feel like everything I’m doing is awkward. Even that sentence was awkward.

OK, so there’s Emma sitting on one of the standard National Health Service chairs with holes in it and spongy stuffing spewing out, and I’m sitting on my bed and then she asks if I want a shower.

“Yeah,” I reply lamely. I say it like I’m struggling to make a decision, even though I’ve been certain that I want a shower since before I got here. Emphasis on the y in “yeah.” Why did I do that? I don’t know.

“You’ll need something to cover your dressings, they can’t get wet. We’ve got some waterproof sleeves you can use . . .” She turns to the wardrobe behind her and passes me a piece of plastic that smells of rubber.