

Choking On Air

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Does human skin breathe?

I wonder... and it's not for the first time.

"Jessie, your Mum and sister are here, waiting for you in the cafeteria." I hear the well known voice of the block nurse, my nurse. I didn't sleep well last night, not with the worry of today's visitors. I rise from my bed and check it for wrinkles, smoothing the covers to neatness with my hands.

I head to the bedroom door. I'm uncomfortable in what I'm wearing but there are no mirrors, so I can't check myself. My clothing has been feeling tighter lately, I imagine myself this way and it sickens me. Mum has offered to bring in some more of my old clothes. She'll have them with her today. I told her not to bother when we spoke yesterday. I won't tell her why, but I have no plans on wearing them. I know they're too big but if they aren't, then I plan to fix that as soon as I can.

Nervous, yes. I'm nervous. I've avoided the cafeteria for some time. I want to go home and I'm hoping the time is close, but it's been a while since Mum and Carly and me have shared a table. My deep breathing relaxes me as I make my way down the stairs using the handrail to steady me.

Mum has been really nice over the phone recently and we've been getting along well. Missing her is an understatement.

I notice the cafe brimming with people. There are other patients with their families too. I see Mum and Carly waving me over. My head spins as I hug Mum, long and slow.

"You've put on weight, that's wonderful," Mum's all smiles as I wriggle from her embrace.

Carly takes our orders but I wave her off. She studies me from across the table. I feel my smile take on caricature proportions. Carly's smile is there too, a puckered wound comes to mind.

"Nothing for me, thanks." I say as I pull my chair in close to the table.

Its legs squeak against the wooden floor and the sound grates as my face tightens, eyes tight, mouth tight. The squeak of my chair leg sets a new tone, which matches my feelings of... regret. The smell of food is in the air. Carly waits for me to change my mind, but not long, thank goodness. My resolve is robust, I do not order.

Her enmity is evident, she takes it with her to the counter. Away from me.

My skin does breathe

I decide and the air worries me. Mum won't approve if I pull my collar over my mouth and nose. Instead I try breathing through my hand to avoid hitchhikers.

"Aren't you going to have anything today?" Mum pats my hand across the table."

"The doctor said you shouldn't push, Mum." I nudge the air with my head in Carly's direction. "Why did you bring her anyway? She hates me."

"She doesn't hate you. She's your sister, she worries about you."

"She hates me."

The familiar feeling of anxiety tightens my chest. Carly will return with their food shortly. My fear of absorbing the foods aroma through my skin, grows. This air carries molecules, little microscopic collections of meat, potato, fat. I begin to rock.

"Please Jessie?" Mum says, her head tilting to her left, "Why are you rocking?"

"Am I?" I don't want to say it's to work off the calories.

"You know you are; now come on," Mum shakes her head, "I knew it was too soon."

I see her disappointment, her brows feet deepen, her lips tighten.

"It's not too soon Mum. I want to come home."

I see Carly at the register and my heart beats faster.

"They won't let you," Mum looks like she's given up, "not while you're rocking."

I stop rocking.

"What are you doing now?"

I don't answer so Mum looks under the table.

"I'm not rocking."

"You're exercising your legs Jessie."

"So!"

She stares at me.

"I don't like sitting in this air, Mum."

“There is nothing wrong with the air.”

Carly approaches with their food. I stand quickly, bumping the table and my chair falls backwards. Mum isn't shocked. Carly pretends to be. I feel the smell of their food against my skin and choke on my fear.

“Skin absorbs stuff, Mum. Why do you think they sell moisturiser? Why does sun screen need to be reapplied?”

“Please Jessie, sit down,” there is comfort in her voice, but it isn't enough.

People are looking at me.

“What is it now?” Carly raises her stupid brow. “Oh I get it. You don't want the fat to seep through your skin. How idiotic, how...”

“I have to shower,” I say pulling the collar of my t-shirt over my nose and mouth. *She doesn't understand. No one does.*

“Jessie, we talked about this. If you can't sit with us, can't eat something then you're going back on your meds.”

Defeat hangs from Mum's face, stretching her skin, aging her.

“I never should have given in to you,” she adds.

I begin to cry. I hate the tablets; they trick me. They hide the calories in the air.

“I'm not going back on those tablets. You can't make me.”

Mum's tears pull at me as I back away, laying their claim in my skin, my face, my mask. I feel Carly's pleasure, not through her motionless lips, not her composure as she flanks Mum. I see the pleasure in her eyes and take strength from her opposition.

I turn and leave the clinic's cafeteria passing today's motto on my way. Large A3 in all its glory. Bold black print against fluorescent pink. Its border is strong and simple like the staff here at Dreamview Lodge. *'It is you, who have the power to change'*
. I read it involuntarily, they've planned their placement well. I look back at Mum and Carly and shake my head, then I tear the pink paper from the wall and throw it where it belongs... In the bin.

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