

GIRL IN PIECES

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GIRL IN PIECES

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*For my mother, M.E.,
1940–2011*

*and my sister, Weasie,
1963–2008*

ONE

I can never win with this body I live in.

—Belly, “Star”

LIKE A BABY HARP SEAL, I'M ALL WHITE. MY FOREARMS ARE thickly bandaged, heavy as clubs. My thighs are wrapped tightly, too; white gauze peeks out from the shorts Nurse Ava pulled from the lost and found box behind the nurses' station.

Like an orphan, I came here with no clothes. Like an orphan, I was wrapped in a bedsheet and left on the lawn of Regions Hospital in the freezing sleet and snow, blood seeping through the flowered sheet.

The security guard who found me was bathed in menthol cigarettes and the flat stink of machine coffee. There was a curly forest of white hair inside his nostrils.

He said, "Holy Mother of God, girl, what's been done to you?"

My mother didn't come to claim me.

But: I remember the stars that night. They were like salt against the sky, like someone spilled the shaker against very dark cloth.

That mattered to me, their accidental beauty. The last thing I thought I might see before I died on the cold, wet grass.

THE GIRLS HERE, THEY TRY TO GET ME TO TALK. THEY WANT to know *What's your story, morning glory? Tell me your tale, snail.* I hear their stories every day in Group, at lunch, in Crafts, at breakfast, at dinner, on and on. These words that spill from them, black memories, they can't stop. Their stories are eating them alive, turning them inside out. They cannot stop talking.

I cut all my words out. My heart was too full of them.

I ROOM WITH LOUISA. LOUISA IS OLDER AND HER HAIR IS LIKE a red-and-gold noisy ocean down her back. There's so much of it, she can't even keep it in with braids or buns or scrunchies. Her hair smells like strawberries; she smells better than any girl I've ever known. I could breathe her in forever.

My first night here, when she lifted her blouse to change for bed, in the moment before that crazy hair fell over her body like a protective cape, I saw them, all of them, and I sucked my breath in hard.

She said, "Don't be scared, little one."

I wasn't scared. I'd just never seen a girl with skin like mine.

EVERY MOMENT IS SPOKEN FOR. WE ARE UP AT SIX O'CLOCK. We are drinking lukewarm coffee or watered-down juice by six forty-five. We have thirty minutes to scrape cream cheese on cardboardy bagels, or shove pale eggs in our mouths, or swallow lumpy oatmeal. At seven fifteen we can shower in our rooms. There are no doors on our showers and I don't know what the bathroom mirrors are, but they're not glass, and your face looks cloudy and lost when you brush your teeth or comb your hair. If you want to shave your legs, a nurse or an orderly has to be present, but no one wants that, and so our legs are like hairy-boy legs. By eight-thirty we're in Group and that's when the stories spill, and the tears spill, and some girls yell and some girls groan, but I just sit, sit, and that awful older girl, Blue, with the bad teeth, every day, she says, *Will you talk today, Silent Sue? I'd like to hear from Silent Sue today, wouldn't you, Casper?*

Casper tells her to knock it off. Casper tells us to breathe, to make accordions by spreading our arms way, way out, and then pushing in, in, in, and then pulling out, out, out, and don't we feel better when we just breathe? Meds come after Group, then Quiet, then lunch, then Crafts, then Individual, which is when you sit with your doctor and cry some more, and then at five o'clock there's dinner, which is more not-hot food, and more Blue: *Do you like macaroni and cheese, Silent Sue? When you getting those bandages off, Sue?* And then Entertainment. After Entertainment, there is Phone Call, and more crying.

And then it's nine p.m. and more meds and then it's bed. The girls piss and hiss about the schedule, the food, Group, the meds, everything, but I don't care. There's food, and a bed, and it's warm, and I am inside, and I am safe.

My name is not Sue.

JEN S. IS A NICKER: SHORT, TWIGLIKE SCARS RUN UP AND DOWN her arms and legs. She wears shiny athletic shorts; she's taller than anyone, except Doc Dooley. She dribbles an invisible basketball up and down the beige hallway. She shoots at an invisible hoop. Francie is a human pincushion. She pokes her skin with knitting needles, sticks, pins, whatever she can find. She has angry eyes and she spits on the floor. Sasha is a fat girl full of water: she cries in Group, she cries at meals, she cries in her room. She'll never be drained. She's a plain cutter: faint red lines crosshatch her arms. She doesn't go deep. Isis is a burner. Scabby, circular mounds dot her arms. There was something in Group about rope and boy cousins and a basement but I shut myself off for that; I turned up my inside music. Blue is a fancy bird with her pain; she has a little bit of everything: bad daddy, meth teeth, cigarette burns, razor slashes. Linda/Katie/Cuddles wears grandma housedresses. Her slippers are stinky. There are too many of her to keep track of; her scars are all on the inside, along with her people. I don't know why she's with us, but she is. She smears mashed potato on her face at dinner. Sometimes she vomits for no reason. Even when she is completely still, you know there is a *lot* happening inside her body, and that it's not good.

I knew people like her on the outside; I stay away from her.

SOMETIMES I CAN'T BREATHE IN THIS GODDAMN PLACE; MY chest feels like sand. I don't understand what's happening. I was too cold and too long outside. I can't understand the clean sheets, the sweet-smelling bedspread, the food that sits before me in the cafeteria, magical and warm. I start to panic, shake, choke, and Louisa, she comes up very close to me in our room, where I'm wedged into the corner. Her breath on my face is tea-minty. She cups my cheek and even that makes me flinch. She says, "Little one, you're with your people."

THE ROOM IS TOO QUIET, SO I WALK THE HALLS AT NIGHT. MY lungs hurt. I move slowly.

Everything is too quiet. I trace a finger along the walls. I do this for hours. I know they're thinking about putting me on sleep meds after my wounds heal and I can be taken off antibiotics, but I don't want them to. I need to be awake and aware.

He could be anywhere. He could be here.

LOUISA IS LIKE THE QUEEN. SHE'S BEEN HERE, THIS TIME, forever. She tells me, "I was the very first fucking girl here, back when they opened, for God's sake." She's always writing in a black-and-white composition book; she never comes to Group. Most of the girls wear yoga pants and T-shirts, sloppy things, but Louisa dresses up every day: black tights and shiny flats, glamorous thrift-store dresses from the forties, her hair always done up in some dramatic way or another. She has suitcases stuffed with scarves, filmy nightgowns, creamy makeup, blood-red tubes of lipstick. Louisa is like a visitor who has no plans to leave.

She tells me she sings in a band. "But my nervousness," she says softly. "My *problem*, it gets in the way."

Louisa has burns in concentric circles on her belly. She has rootlike threads on the insides of her arms. Her legs are burned and carved in careful, clean patterns. Tattoos pattern her back.

Louisa is running out of room.

CASPER STARTS EVERY GROUP THE SAME WAY. THE ACCORDION exercise, the breathing, stretching your neck, reaching to your toes. Casper is tiny and soft. She wears clogs with elfish, muted heels. All the other doctors here have clangy, sharp shoes that make a lot of noise, even on carpet. She is pale. Her eyes are enormous, round, and very blue. There are no jagged edges to Casper.

She looks around at us, her face settling into a gentle smile. She says, “Your job here is *you*. We are all here to get better, aren’t we?”

Which means: we are all presently shit.

But we knew that already.