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The inside, the out

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The inside, the out

“Isn’t it funny,” her mother is saying, “that none of the Faunstalks are here? I mean usually there are at least three or four of them wandering around looking beautiful.”

Claire opens her notebook and makes a tally mark. 13 today. There are columns for “beautiful,” “amazing,” and “perfect.” So far today “beautiful” is ahead. Claire likes Jeff Faunstalk. He is beautiful, and nice. But Claire is fourteen and she is home schooled now and she never sees Jeff Faunstalk any more and for a moment resents her mother for saying it, but in another moment forgives. She has to keep a clear mind about her mother’s intent, after all, which is good. Claire is now carefully placed during parties. Usually she sits in a soft chair in a sunroom that is out of the way of guests unless they are going to the bathroom. Claire doesn’t know why it is called a sunroom when it is always cold and no sun gets in, and she doesn’t know why one of her mother’s assistants, Jules, has to sit in there with her. Claire can wave to the guests just fine, and doesn’t need Jules. Jules is actually a nurse and Claire wishes that she would wear scrubs so everyone would know that her mother needs help from nurses, but scrubs wouldn’t be proper party attire, now, would they? Her mother is doing what she calls a check on her, but Claire sees it as a continuation of the pattern of her mother’s endless pacing. The only difference between a regular day pacing and a party day pacing is that her mother is in a dress. Her mother is talking to Jules but turns to Claire to say

“You look nice, dear,” and as she says it her face does a funny thing.

Claire waits for her mother’s face to release its funniness. It takes so long, sometimes. This compliment is an obvious lie, based on the ever-accumulating data. Only this year Claire has been allowed to choose her own outfits. They are outfits from a closet full of clothes that

have been bought for her, but still tonight she was allowed to wear her blue shirt for protection of heart and a gray skirt that reaches the floor so nobody can see anything but her face and her hands. Her feet are bare, and she tries to keep them tucked in between the arm and the seat cushion of the chair for warmth in the sunless sunroom, for when they touch her legs they are like ice and it sends more cold right through her.

Her mother has left while Claire still contemplates the verbal and the facial expression, back out to the main of the house where people's bodies and talk make the air warm and red. Her mother is a beautiful-amazing-perfect patient and she is also city council and throws a good party. She needs many people around her all of the time now, and Claire isn't many people.

Claire opens her notebook and looks over her last entry:

Monday: Mother appears to have no visible difference in smile, but occurrence while on the phone a new development. Usually M presents with apathetic look while speaking on phone, with voice pitch slightly elevated to indicate interest. Cell phone call history indicates call was from elder daughter, an event not reported to younger daughter. M's phone confiscated and put in contraband until report of this omission. M became agitated without phone and spent two hours shopping on the internet. All purchases were jewelry for herself, indicating a secondary diagnosis of transference in the form of self-decoration.

Mother is making the rounds, wearing one of Monday's purchases: a cocktail ring with one large, dark purple stone. Its irregular borders make it look like a blood blister on her index finger, and from the sunroom Claire watches her lightly place her hand on Jack Suco's arm. She envisions the blood bursting out onto him, and then he and everyone else will know about her

mother's sickness. Claire has had a blood blister before. She knows what release feels like, and wishes it, just a little, for her mother; but more than that Claire wants Jules the nurse-in-disguise to have to go away from her to help her mother. Jules sits and does things on her cell phone. Jules doesn't look at Claire except for when Claire moves or looks like she might. The writing doesn't phase her; she thinks Claire is writing poetry, and Jules has no mind for such things.

Through the doorway Claire can see people pass by again and again as if on a carousel. It will only be a matter of time before her mother has had enough glasses of wine in her to mention the mugging. The constant re-telling of the story signifies to Claire three things: 1) That M thinks the selection of her as victim made her somehow exceptional compared to the others who had been on the street at the time. 2) That M believes her selection made her somehow exceptional to the others who were at the party. 3) That M is still sick. It is this third point Claire documents.

In searches of her mother's closets and dressers, Claire has found no evidence to support her primary diagnosis, that the illness that started when her mother hit the pavement is as strong as ever. She looks for pills, mostly. She's seen on TV how a person can look up what pills are when they find them and figure out what they are for. But there's nothing. Across the sunroom, Jules sucks her teeth at something on her phone and Claire reads on:

Tuesday: Rather than receding, the sickness seems to be spreading. M did not dress or groom today. M appeared to have localized pain in her right hip. M limped around and ate nothing, but drank hot tea and came out of her room only to make more tea. Sounds of distress can be heard from behind M's bedroom

door. If not spreading, the sickness might be moving from location to location within M with remarkable speed. Further observation is needed.

Claire's mother appears in the frame of the doorway again. She has made her way around the room touching everyone, Claire knows, with her hands, the ring finding its way to every conversation. People admiring it, holding it to the light. What is it? They asked. Mother didn't know. Antique find, she said. *Why is she telling people that?* Claire wonders, and then, *she's going to get everyone sick*, Claire thinks. First the city council and all these important people then everyone. Just everyone. What entered her mother through the pavement at impact will spread through the whole city.

Then Claire hears it. Jules hears it too, and looks up toward the doorway. The doorway was lighted now. It is dark in the sunroom except for the doorway and Jules' face, lit from the blue glow of her phone. Jules smiles wickedly and taps at her phone more frantically. She doesn't notice Claire staring at her from her darkening chair. A very solid plan is beginning to take shape in Claire's mind; the timeline and the images line up for once, and she can see everything so clearly.

"It was like he was giving me a hug," Claire's mother says, laughing, right on cue. "I didn't know what was going on until later when my clutch was no longer in my hands. I was so stunned." More laughing, fanning her face. The people around her chuckle, shuffle their feet. Most of them have heard it before. Who had asked? It doesn't matter. She always slips it into a conversation somewhere. "So strange," she says, a wistful look on her round, girlish face. "I didn't know why someone would run up to me and give me a hug." Claire notices she left out the part about her being pushed to the ground again. M never tells anyone that she was pushed

to the ground but Claire knows that she was pushed down and she was hurt and it keeps hurting her day after day. Claire knows how to help. She turns in her chair so that the back porch light falls through the window and onto her notebook.

Wednesday: Sudden awakening produced no confirmation of diagnosis. M had no appearance of localized pain, rather appeared confused and as though the sickness was heavy throughout her body. M was not oriented to time or place. M kept asking what is wrong, what is wrong. M now has all the lights on and is patrolling the house, pacing and smoking. M is not known to have a history of smoking. She is in the den by herself, now, crying and talking. M is saying "please, please," over and over.

Claire's grandmother must have had the sickness, too. Claire could remember her grandmother, so stooped over she was almost double. Near the end, her grandmother just wept in bed with it. And then it was over. They had cremated her in hopes it wouldn't be passed along. It was, though, it was too late. And Claire thinks she has it, too, and she knows when she got: When she was a child, she was put down for a nap in the middle of a party, in a quiet bedroom among the soft down coats. Her mother covered her with a wool coat, one lined in a slippery fabric, but the collar tucked up under Claire's chin was scratchy. Then her mother left. Claire fought sleep, and a nausea came over her and the heat and the prickliness of the coat was unbearable. She heard someone come in and felt a weight on the bed beside her, then two voices, very low. She squeezed her eyes tight and waited for them to leave but they would not. She thought she would die lying there, hot and itchy, but she simply fell asleep. It must

have been then. She realizes now it was someone else's party, and that they didn't go to others' parties any more.

Thursday: M presents with severe agitation. M paces and directs the event staff too harshly. M's face is contorted in what could be called a grimace. M reports she did not sleep well and needs to rest. M is unable to rest and takes a three-hour walk, unattended.

Claire lets the sickness out of her because she knows that healing cannot happen while sickness still runs its course. She has been waiting for it to run its course. When her father was alive he got more and more round, and not evenly or pleasantly, but sagging like a bag of puss, until his body couldn't take it any more. At least he had died and not exploded. His name was Robert. Robert took up one sentence in Claire's notebook. It simply said "Robert: couldn't survive it." Her mother swells up with it, too. It swells up in her hands some days, in her face, others, sometimes in her belly under looser and looser clothing. Claire's sickness corresponds with her mother's schedule, roughly. She can feel it moving in her but it's better after she lets some of it out. If she watches her mother carefully, she can tell when.

It was a summer party when she talked to Jeff Faulkner. The adults had made their way back inside, but the two of them had remained with their feet in the cool water of the pool. The water reflected bits of light on Jeff's face as he asked her how old she was. Claire didn't answer. They had been talking about Jeff's father, who served on the city council with Claire's mother. Jeff said his father had no backbone and would do whatever people wanted him to do. Claire said "My mother is dying," and Jeff looked at her and frowned, and asked again how old she was. She picked up his hand and inspected the black mark on the inside of his forearm; a tattoo

of twisted tree limb that climbed up into his damp t-shirt. She held his arm up like a specimen, unsure of what to do then. He pulled his arm out of her hands and got up, placing her hands together as if in prayer, and holding them for a moment inside of his own. He looked at the house, all lit up and full of people. They looked like marionettes in the windows, Claire thought. The show was inside and outside at the same time; it depended on where you wanted to be. She looked at the water as Jeff walked away.

Friday: M's countenance has changed completely since yesterday. Her movements have a slowness to them, her smile comes easily. There is no smile to the eyes, though. The eyes look unnaturally wide, though calm. When M appears for the party her hair is smooth and nails buffed. Cosmetics have been applied, likely by one of the staff, as M's hands have taken on a slight tremor. M asks if she looks all right, a marked change of attitude from previous such events. When asked if she feels all right, M does not reply. She is then seen talking on the phone. After using the phone M takes a peculiar and new interest in her younger daughter, and her younger daughter's outfit.

Claire's mother is now talking to Dr. Francis, the doctor Claire knew from the year her father died. Claire saw the doctor's eyes blink and settle on her for just a second, before moving back to her mother. Her mother had put her hand with that ring on the doctor's arm. It should have burst by now, Claire thought, if only! Perhaps it would help. To let the sickness out. She can see others in the room that look like they have the sickness. Maybe not see. She just feels it. But she knows now what to do. Now Dr. Francis is really looking at her. Everyone is beginning

to turn to her. Her mother has made them all turn to look at her. The air feels too thick, and the room too quiet. Claire is shaking with sickness, and it needs to get out.

Claire looks at Jules, who has not moved and is just a blue face in the dark. She grabs the phone out of Jules' hands and runs to the door to the porch, and throws the phone into the darkness.

"Hey!" says Jules, and is already running out after it.

Claire shuts the door and turns the lock after her. She hears her mother's murmured apologies and then the clacking of heels coming in after her. She presses her back against the cold wall and feels her heart beat. There is nothing for a moment, and then the doorway to the rest of the house has closed and her mother has her arms wrapped around her and is squeezing her, squeezing her so tight, telling her "it's going to be okay, it's going to be okay." She feels her mother's breasts against her and works her way out of the hold. She shoves M, shoves her like the man on the street did. There is a crash, and Claire thinks she might have broke something loose that was clinging to her mother, a parasite. So she fumbles to her in the dark and shoves her again. M is silent. Someone knocks on the door. Claire turns and pushes the notebook with all its observations into her mother's hands, pushing and turning her mother's shoulders back toward the door. Mother moves with Claire's's insistence. Claire can hear her mother swallowing.

"Take it," Claire says, pushing the notebook hard into her mother's chest, forcing on her all of the evidence that she has. "Take it. They're all waiting for you." She opens the door and pushes her mother out, alone for the showing.