

Curtains

by Elizabeth J. Colen

She wants her mother back and all I can give her is this—over and over. She doesn't want my mouth, wants no kissing anywhere even. Just this. Like this—quiet and rough. Quiet because her stepfather is napping in the bedroom next to ours after having wept all night. We heard him, even fucked through that though neither of us mentioned it or let on that we heard. Her aunts and cousins have been roaming the halls, aimless in grief, tidying things, looking for things to do, things to fix. I worry they would hear us, would come looking for her, would hear this. But if I slow to any softness she pulls on me in a way that lets me know this slowing is unacceptable.

There isn't much in the way of logic I could provide for her. Her mother—her best friend really—dead at 50 from cancer that should have been caught earlier. Spent, she lay her head on my chest. I think of the cells the doctors tried to cut out of her mother here. How incomplete she must have looked without her breasts. How bare. How scarred. How incomplete she must have been when she died, when they burned her. How her ashes have none of this. The nipples missing, the flesh of the breasts. And they cost her too. In life she spent a lot on them, was vain in those ways. What they put into women in the 60s who didn't have enough of what they wanted, or enough of what men wanted or enough of what women thought they should want—they cost a lot then. And were unsafe. This is where the sickness began. A rupture in the chest the heart had nothing to do with. I feel my chest might burst with the dead heaviness of her on me. Whatever is in her head that makes it feel this way won't ever come out.

I stroke her hair a few times, murmuring, I think motherly almost. This seems to soothe her. I want her to cry. To show she's feeling it, or maybe because I keep crying and it isn't my mother dead. Or maybe I'm jealous she has a mother to mourn, that I wish mine were gone instead so I could forget her. Maybe I want her to cry so I'm not alone in the grief, whatever it is. I let my fingers twine in her

hair, to get my hand closer to her head, the heat there maybe, or as though I might tease out her thoughts. I press my fingers into her scalp until she shifts, until she isn't so heavy on my chest. Maybe this is what I wanted. Maybe it wasn't her thoughts at all, not her emotion. But for her to stop being so heavy on me—for me to stop holding so much of her.

There's a knock on the door, a whisper we can't hear—or I can't hear and I assume she can't either. But she says, “I can't” and then “go away” like she's answering something. And I know they are two statements but of course I hear them as one: “I can't go away.” And then she says something to me I can't quite make out and then another sound on the door that isn't knocking exactly but maybe a heel catching on the bottom of the door as it turns. And I start to say something. Maybe “I'm sorry,” maybe “I love you,” maybe “I can't” or “I'm hungry” but all that comes out is “I” before her hands are on my mouth, in my mouth like she's pulling words off my teeth or scratching them off my tongue with her fingers. I start to speak again, around her fingers this time—just two of them in there now pressing down on my tongue and all she says is “no.” And then “now, this” and the hand that isn't in my mouth pulls my hand to where she wants it. This is where she always wants it—not in her hair or touching her cheek or back, but here at the center of her. She pulls on me hard, like she wants to be pulled, pushes me like she wants. And her hand slips and I slip, off-balance and jam my chin into her cheek. And I want this to be funny the way it always would have been. “Clumsy lover,” she would have said before, “clumsy lover, I love you.” But she doesn't say this, just pulls me more and harder, makes me into the right thing, the thing for her. And I start crying again, quietly at first then coughing so it doesn't sound so much like sobs. I don't know if this is for her, or for him in the bedroom next to ours, or for the ones who might be in the hall, or for me, but it's probably for me.

She pushes my head onto her chest. I don't think this is to quiet me or calm me, not really. There's nothing tender in this, nothing nice. Just to get my tears away from her neck maybe or maybe so I

don't hear her say "yes, that's it" like she's embarrassed to be satisfied by anything right now. And I'm memorizing the pattern on the curtains—the camellias and ribbons, the pattern of green leaves on a lighter green background—because I already know her so well, know her body. And I don't want to know any of it right now. Don't want to be in here or in her or inside of me or any of it. I just want to open the curtains and let in some light or I want to hide behind them until she comes looking for me.

