

black friday

by Glynnis Eldridge

She is laughing, watching me spit out a mouthful of seaweed. It's a soft kind of laugh: small gasps between small sounds of her eyes closed, curling with the corners of her mouth. Her left eye curls a little less, closes a little more than it did when she laughed a year ago, it being partially sewn shut: the skin of her eyelid is a little tighter, her green iris is a little paler than it has been since we met in early October of my birth year. She said *honey, thank you*, when I came into her hospital room and held her hand. *What are you doing here?* I tell her I was so worried I couldn't digest Thanksgiving dinner and had to come visit. I try to make a joke of it. I want her to laugh, to pull me closer, to kiss my cheek. I want to smell her hair, her skin, what I don't smell now, what I think may have always just been baby powder. She says she is happy to see me, and that is all I think I need. Juxtaposed against family members from the other half of my DNA who tell my brother about more ways to make six figures and who tell me they think my skin looks nice, I am relaxed in her presence, relieved to see her moving, albeit merely shifting her weight in bed, moving her feet against my mother's hands, and sipping tomato soup through a straw.

Yesterday she gripped my hand tightly while two nurses held out her arm, pulled her skin taut to find a vein for a new needle for more fluids. I told her to squeeze while it hurt. She clenched her jaw instead, moving the muscles in her face in a way I had only seen toothless faces move. A new or never realized underbite. Her jaw clenched and her muscles pulsated as if in seizure. I told her to count to five: ONE. Her eyes are closed. TWO. Her eyelids flicker. THREE. Her jaw is clenched. FOUR. She is sputtering, murmuring short bursted phrases of *my back*, and, *pull me up*, and, *pull it out, my back, lower my head, my neck, my pillow*. FIVE. The nurses are still looking for a vein. My mother and her sister are together on the other side of a curtain they have pulled from the back wall to divide

the room. I see their shoes under the hanging white and blue striped fabric; white sneakers and stylish black flats for hiking facing each other. I hear sniffing and their voices in quiet dialogue. The nurses find a vein. They pierce the soft skin with a point and a vial on its' end and they wait for blood and nothing happens. A loud moan. Her eyes are wide open, staring up at the ceiling. My mother steps out from behind the curtain. She looks at me and my face shrivels up and intrinsically turns away. I had been stroking her hand, her fingers, the skin between her fingers, the skin on her palm, her wrist, and I had been saying it's ok, just a few more minutes, let's count to five, together: one, two, threefourfive, one two three four five, one two three, until I recognized whose hand was in my hand, and how long I have known it, how many times I have held it, all of the places it led me to, all the socks it helped me put on my feet when I was little and insisted I couldn't remember the right way to, all the food it fed me, all the winters it warmed me, it held me when I was in bed and crying and afraid too. My face is hot. The i.v. is secured with tape and the vial is removed, finally filled with enough blood. Someone suggests lowering her hospital bed. While the down arrow button is held, a loud squeal is let out, one that sounds like my alarm clock at home, one that accompanies her low pitched, gasped *NO, NO*. Her eyes are wide open, still staring up at the ceiling. I lean in to kiss her forehead and place a thumb on her temple. I move my thumb in a small circle and say it's ok, you're alright, it's ok, and she looks at me, blinks, breathes out, looks back up at the ceiling, closes her eyes and clenches her jaw again and breathes inout inout inout in out out out inout inout inout in out in out inout in outin outin out in out in out in out and I turn around and face my mother and my aunt who are now seated on a couch cushion in front of the hospital room window and I exhale and make a face and go out into the hallway scratching my head. In the single stall bathroom at the end of the hallway there is a brown stain on the floor in front of the toilet. There are yellow spots on the seat. I undo my pants and grab for a seat cover and put it down on the white stone and I sit on it and pee and lean forward, put my elbows

on my thighs and bring my hands up to my head and I put my head in my hands and before I start thinking about intentional breathing or peeing I am crying into my palms, onto my thighs, and into my underwear and my pants around my knees. I am careful and quiet in crying. I get up and buckle my belt, flush the toilet, wash my hands. My eyes and nose are red like they are in the cold.

Back at her house the following night you are writing this at four in the morning, interrupted by sounds of paws or feet or something moving outside, on the roof, in the house, or on the stairs, or right outside a window in the room you always sleep in. Maybe a water pipe, maybe aliens. You recall sleeping here years ago, similarly fearful of sounds in the night, calling out for help and her running to your side, reminding you of the woods behind the house, of the animals who live here too, of the sounds they make when walking. She mentioned the deer who peskily visit at night to eat the petals off of the flowers in her garden.

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