

Florida

by Susannah Felts

The doctor gives my sister the answers she wants. I can see her now, fingering her brittle bangs, blinking so fast that this microscopist she's found might be alarmed if he were to look at her, but he has not done much of that; instead he peers at the monitor, uses a sterling accessory to show her the worms.

His shirtsleeves are rolled and his forearms are tanned and veiny. He taps on the screen and coughs. "Right there," he says; "do you see?" Maybe there's soothing flute music trickling through a speaker in the ceiling; maybe the lights are dimmed.

My sister raises one skinny cheek off the crinkling paper, angling for a better look; she thinks his fancy pointing stick must be blocking the view. Probably it's engraved; she can't see any initials, but probably they're there.

Now, at last, she finds what she's been searching for. Worms. Like bitty pale larva, like half-moons of air trapped under fingernails. She thinks she sees one twitch; she blinks more furiously and hates herself for it. She's going to miss a wiggle, the proof that they are alive and eating the energy right out of her red blood cells. She can't sleep and she's losing weight and her eyes act like they're tapping out a code, she complains to me; not that anybody on earth could crack it. Last week she wanted to saw them right out of her skull. Her doctor suggested a shrink. The shrink said not until the end of the month. My sister got desperate, withdrew cash from Pops' account and hightailed it to Florida on advice she picked up from an online forum.

Has she been in touch? Pops wants to know. He's shuffling around behind me, his breath like a crust on the air, his shoulders round and

bent like two spoons. He's agitated, and so I'm getting the business. "You better tell me if she gets in touch. I'm worried too ya know."

After dinner and the news he conks out in his chair, his head propped against a drool-stained pillow. I take the cordless out on the back steps and dial my sister's cell. Pops believes it's out of service. She told him bogus digits.

"He's worried," I tell her. "It's not about the money. He doesn't even know about the money."

"Like hell," my sister says. "I know you. How you protect him. How you inform him. I'm not trying to pick a fight. But let's be honest for once. Can you be honest for once?"

I see one chopstick leg crossed over the other; I see that dangling foot of hers beating the air like hummingbird wings. I had told her she was probably losing weight out of that old frantic foot alone. But now she says she knows different. It's the parasites. She will not waste away. She will live to show Pops and me both, live to find a man to love her bones, blinks, gastrointestinal grief and all. She'll graduate, get the white leather nurse clogs and loose cotton print scrubs. She'll wear her hair in a high ponytail, whiten her teeth, wear a baby blue fleece and a tiny gold cross around her neck, smile nice at the doctors. She will insert needles into flesh without thinking twice. I try to change the subject. I ask her about what the man found in her blood.

"He has it on video," she says. "And it showed up in the voice analysis."

"So he analyzed your voice. And in your voice he heard worms," I say. "The worms in your blood."

"He's a healer," she says, her voice all trembly. But I detect the same old self-doubt that keeps her churning, that now keeps her believing she is full of waste, stuff of which she needs to be rid, cleansed, freed. I can see her in front of her hotel bathroom's mirror, her shirt pulled up with one hand, the other pressing into the grooves between her ribs. "This man is a genius," she says. "He cleansed my colon-- not once but three times. Got half a crayon out of there; can you imagine? A stub of colored wax in my gut since I was like four or god, who knows. And my feet, he bathed my feet in ionized water."

"He's not a genius," I say, "he's a Jesus. What's his waiting room like?"

"Pretty," she says, missing my point. "Blue and green and pink. Very Florida."

I can see her there. Her flimsy size zero tops and bottoms little lumps scattered around the room that she's got air-conditioned down to sixty-five. The queen lump of comforter she peeled from the bed first thing. The nightstand barnacled with safety-cap bottles, wads of Kleenex, squished foam earplugs. She's stripped down to her bra and panties now, the better to look at herself. The microscopist's number and address are the only things written on a sheet of loose leaf ripped from a notebook she should be filling with instructions for the monitoring of a catheter, the dressing of a wound. She is flunking out of school. She leans back against the pillow, her hand in the soft, shallow bowl of her belly. In her veins, she feels the worms wriggling in their death throes. Soon she'll pass them right out; her body a detoxed temple. Her hand finds a bottle of supplements, pushes and twists the lid. I hear a rattling against plastic.

"I don't know if I want to come back, Sis," she is saying to me.

I'm tempted to tell her to stay. Marry the microscopist and have babies whose colons will never be anything but spic and span. The microscopist will keep your weight up; Pops and I will be fine on our own, with the roaming peacocks and rainwater collecting in the rusting satellite dish. Life is simple at the end of this road; some of us actually like it out here. Anyway, you have never been the sister I wanted. Your depression fed mine. And your foolishness stuffed it silly. You thought I had no need for you and you were right. I don't need you. But I can't help but love you. No. I mean. Don't stay, come back. You can't escape to Florida just like that and leave me here.

I say none of this. I listen to her prattle on: the ozone treatments that are killing the worms, her bowels' return to regularity, the tingling in her fingertips soon no more. In the background, I can hear Oprah cracking jokes with her studio audience. My sister made it into that audience when she was a high school senior; she pretended to want me to go with, but I begged off on account of Pops needing three square meals a day plus the insulin that he might forget if I left it up to him. My sister flew to Chicago, shopped, ate and probably puked some too. She took her second cab ride ever, after the one from the airport, to see Oprah. That day the show was about accident preparedness. Beneath my sister's seat at the show was a first-aid kit, compliments of Ms. Winfrey and Johnson & Johnson. My sister the budding nurse, not yet the patient, believed it was a sign; she said she knew she was meant to heal.

