

Excerpt from *My Happy Life*

I.

The door is locked from the outside; they went away and forgot me. It is not difficult: many times I have almost forgotten myself.

Because the world is full. It is teeming with us.

What happened was, the last one who remembered me was gone. It was Jim the night orderly, who faded away. And then the others left too. They closed the hospital and left me in this room, which was locked. And is still.

The swinging ball has not yet come. I think the building is waiting. Sometimes I think that I hear it sigh, like an old dog sleeping.

So now I seem to be alone. That is, if any-one saw me, they would take me for alone.

But I am not alone. I have you.

And aloneness is only a ghost. It likes to seep through cracks, at night or in the winter. But there are no cracks here. Here I feel sewn up, surrounded by substance like a nut in velvet or an eye in a sock. The room is seamless and all over my skin, enclosing. To keep me company, I have both dreams and memories.

Excuse me: if I could open the door I would leave, certainly. Or if the door melted, white steel turning to liquid, and flowed out between its own edges, bending like a spoon and spread-ing across the floor in a lake of metal, I would also walk out in that case. If the lake never cooled I would still walk, let-ting the soles of my feet turn into fire. Even if my legs began to melt, I would see just beyond the door before I fell. What lies there is the rest of everything. And the people I never knew and who never knew me.

How I miss them.

And also, I am always ready for an unexplained event: the melting of the door. I have heard myself promise many times that if I should wake up on the small, hard bed one morning and see the walls sliding and caving in, running thick as honey around my bedposts, I will not hesitate but stand and go.

As yet there have been no signs of melting.

But there are other ways to leave a room.

I have no matches, or maybe I could burn the walls. For light there are two bulbs in my ceiling, which have never yet given out. I keep them good by lighting the bedroom only while I write, and never

lighting the bathroom. I have no television and no books and no food.

And of course no windows.

What I have is a shoebox, containing some other things: the stubs of several pencils I once was given, for example, and the dull blade of a razor, which I sharpen them with. I found the razorblade in the drain of my bathtub once, slitting my longest finger as I grasped for it, glinting down there in the dark tunnel. It had caught on the crosshairs of the pipe.

I also have a threadbare towel, a small tooth, a flattened, pressed leaf from a tree named ginkgo and one pale blue oval of glass within a silver rim, thin as the skin of an onion-, by which I remember my happy life. And I have two paper shoes with elastic and ruffles around the ankles. These things are lovely.

On my person I bear other memories: one foot that is bent from the ankle and a design on my back like bending reeds, raised from the skin. I have an ear that is garbled and rippled into the shape of a frilly mushroom, where the cartilage has knitted itself into twists and flounces. I have purple spots that cover my kneecaps, bruises that are not fading, and an orange plastic hospital bracelet around my wrist that bears my date of admission. I cannot take it off. This bracelet is a survivor.

I once heard it said that rocks are majestic, rocks and mountains that hold themselves jagged and grand over the humble valleys. They are great because of their very long lives, and how beneath them many smaller things die. So if that which lives forever is best, my bracelet is like a god.

And some things are missing that should be with me, or not quite as they should be, and they too are memories I have gathered. Such as my hair, which all turned white long ago. So that now, though I am not yet ancient, to someone whose vision was only slightly blurred I would seem to be eighty.

But I am not eighty. I do not think I am forty, even. But excuse me, I am no longer sure. I have forgotten certain details, such as the year we are in.

Because a year of the world is not the same as a year of the body.

And there is the torn corner of a dollar bill, a scrap of paper with words written on it, and a stiff brown pod, flattened like an umbrella on an old stem, from a vase of dried flowers. It has round holes in it that once held seeds.

These are not pleasing to me but I keep them anyway.

And often, to fall asleep, I think of a great white bird. It is bigger than an airplane, its wings are wide and strong. I think that I am lying nestled in the hollow between one of the wings and the gentle great back, and I feel the wings very slowly lifting and falling as the bird carries me.

Sometimes I get frightened suddenly that I will fall off, and then I have to imagine threads or ropes, impossibly soft but impossibly strong, that fasten me to the great bird loosely. If I tumble then they catch me and draw me back without any shock at all.

And on the back of this great white bird, with wise dark eyes and a noble long bill, I fly over the country. The feathers of the bird are downy, and keep me warm and dry. And below us the mountains and the rivers and oceans stretch along endlessly. There is a green, rolling patchwork of farms.

And the wings beat beneath me.

I smooth the towel over my purple knees, I hold the delicate blue oval up to where the light comes from, on the ceiling. I am used to the dimness and I can see in it. The bulb above the bed lies in a convex disc of some nearly opaque matter, and if I stare for a long period of time I can see the bodies of moths and flies in the shallow basin. I will not eat them, not only because I cannot reach but also because I have never been able to eat what once moved itself on purpose.

I know the hospital has been abandoned by the deep silence beyond the walls. And the hot water stopped coming when the heat of the walls and air faded. I drink cold water from the bathroom tap to fill my stomach, but I am getting thinner. There is a dent scraped in the plaster of the wall, from an occasion several days ago when I scratched at it with a pencil and tried to eat the powder. I would not advise this.

If there are others beyond the density of walls, likewise forgotten in dim rooms like this, I would caution them against it.

At first, when the heat went, I tested the walls for faint sound. I beat on them with knuckles first and then the heels of my hands, asking if anyone heard me, in case there were some others. But either the walls are fortresses or I am the only one left here.

Long ago I finished the toothpaste, the shampoo and the soap. They were not tasty either, although the toothpaste was by far the best. I had to tear the tube open and lick out the insides. How

hard it was surprised me. I used one of my pencils to make the first puncture.

I miss the days and nights. Time is the same in here, and goes on. All I can do is hold each object carefully and think. So that the hours begin to move again. And I can write in small letters on the walls that cannot be eaten.

## **Box**

Science has many laws, apparently. Of all of them I only know two: there is a force called gravity, and the universe came from a speck.

Myself I came from a box marked Brown Ladies Narrow 8, which had been left on a street. So I spent some of the first times I recall in a building not unlike how this one used to be: immense and patrolled by a legion of Mrs., who were often quite large and portly. One of the Mrs., a Mrs. Ray, once told me she had found the box on a wet sidewalk in a long steady drizzle of rain.

During the night the rain had soaked the box. She came upon it in the morning, while she was carrying a bag of garbage to the curb with an umbrella in her other hand, and saw that it contained something naked, cold, blue, and slippery. At first she mistook it for an ugly doll, and then a dead body. Until my mouth opened and made a circle, like a fish after a hook. "You gaped like a fish," said Mrs. Ray. So this was how, said Mrs. Ray, I first became a beneficiary of the kindness of the state.

And this was also when I first became alone. I was quite fortunate since, if the habit of being alone is gained when people are still young, they will not mind it so much later.

She told me about the box's discovery, and when I asked her if they still had it anywhere she said that all the boxes were kept in the basement. I went down to the basement and sat among the shelves. They were piled high with boxes, so many that I then believed, for some years afterward, that each of the children had come in a box and had one of their own. I found my box at last, the one she had described. It was faded green, with markings on the end, and had the porous feel of cardboard that has been waterlogged before. Such cardboard molts at the touch of a finger, drops its frail skin in rolls and pills. It said Brown Ladies Narrow 8. And it was full of nails.

I turned it upside down and let the nails rain onto my lap; and I have carried it with me since then.

Now Mrs. Ray, who had the beauty of a horse or of a cow when she was eating, great, placid, square and soft, and munch-ing very slowly, was prone to tell me of the kind justice of the state most evenings and most days. She also liked to tell me of the kind justice of the church, and of policemen, and the Protective Services, and also of herself. She said, "We all have our crosses to bear. Oh mighty mighty oh."

This was between the foster families, when many of us came back to the buildings to wait. It was in the waiting place that we always came back to.

"You are extra," said Mrs. Ray, nodding and munching at the long table, one time when I had left a family with too many of us there. "Nobody needs you. It is overpopulation."

The family was the Rubens and my favorite was thin Mr. Rubens with big teeth and an Adam's apple. Mr. Rubens put a bag on his head.

"Poor Mr. Rubens, mercy mercy me," said Mrs. Ray when I first told her how I saw Mr. Rubens--when the baby cried loudly--sitting, staring, and putting holes in his own knee with the knife that he usually used for the fish.

Mr. Rubens said to me, "Get me a plastic bag from under the sink."

Then he sprayed a can into the bag and tied it around his neck over his head. Flopping, he danced. With his face pink-ly invisible. We could see his mouth stretched like an O between the letters of the pink writing on the bag, A&P.

When he fell down and we were all of us crying, I, being the oldest, called Children's Protective Services and said, "Mr. Rubens put a bag on his head."

Soon the apartment was teeming with kind policemen and kind paramedics. Mrs. Rubens chewed gum.

Anyway, when I asked why it happened, Mrs. Ray said, "Too many kids for the Rubens. She wanted the money, but he was a depressive and on medication. That is not allowed."

And then Mrs. Ray became quite agitated, as she was sometimes prone to be when she was under the influence. As she called it to me. She clenched her teeth and said, "The lying, lying bitch! She lied a blue streak. She lied enough to bring the maggots of Satan squirming from the ground."

I said, "Excuse me?"

That was what Mr. Rubens had taught me to say, in the event of confusion. He smiled often and counseled me: "Don't say what. Say excuse me or pardon me."

I thought he was a kind, kind man, yet kinder than the justice of the state, which was not yet apparent to me. He taught me a few things before placing the bag on his head. He taught me several ways in which to be polite. Including lifting a hand to your mouth when you cough. He liked to say, when he taught me something, "Do that for me. And I will not have lived in vain."

That was when Mrs. Ray said, "She wanted the extra money. Which the government pays for you, extra money for extra bodies."

I told Mrs. Ray about a memory I thought I had. In the dream I was in a place before I was born, the place that I came from. And there were crowds of people stretching to the horizon. They waited and they waited still. And then they were behind me, gone.

I felt sorry for them but certainly did not know why. And I knew that they also felt sorry for me. Some water was suspended in the air between us, water that carried sound and warmth. And in the vapor of the atmosphere all sorrows mingled in my eyes. Nothing stayed separate and so the sorrows made a tender bridge.

But Mrs. Ray told me this memory was wrong. She said I was nowhere before I was born. And I would go there once again someday.

Mrs. Ray said, "You were nothing and you will be nothing again."

Then she laughed giddily.

Further Mrs. Ray told me that, if I had never been born, I would never have minded.

Still, I was very pleased that it had occurred. I kept that to myself. I smiled about it in the dark.

The next time I came back after I had to leave a foster family, Mrs. Ray was away for a vein operation. Another of the Mrs. told me that she was getting a new, special vein put into her hollow leg so that the blood would not clump there like sap on a tree. Several other extra children and I had to make a card for her on newsprint, which the Mrs. stretched out from a roll onto the floor. One of us drew a picture of a purple dragon breathing green fire.

Some time later Mrs. Ray returned from her vein operation. By then I was gone from the holding house already. She visited the place where I was living with my new family, because she had to do what she was prone to call an inspection.

"Well glory, glory be," she said to me, and patted the couch beside her. "This is an awful big cage for a small rat like you. Tee hee."

It was the largest house I had ever lived in up till then, and we each had our own room to sleep in, and there were only two other children besides me. One of them was real. "You know that Jeremy is their actual real son," said Mrs. Ray.

I asked her how her hollow leg was doing after the vein operation. I had thought it was a polite question but she looked at me with her upper lip tightly wrinkled and the bottom one trembling. She was agitated once again, I could see.

"Who said that, rat," she asked. "Rat rat rat. Garbage vermin! Stinky!"

The mother of the family was standing behind her at the living room door. And she looked upon Mrs. Ray sternly and told her she was harming my self-esteem as a person. Mrs. Ray went to the bathroom and then left without saying goodbye, but I watched her wobble down the gravel driveway on her square heels through the front window. And I felt a sadness descend on me. Her shoulders were hunched over as she went and I wished to tender an apology, although she was too far away already.

So I only said, "Excuse me."

Still, my sadness has never hurt me too badly. That is, if I let it wash over me, I feel newly clean after a while.

It seems only to be the shift of a wind around lost times and opportunities. And I recall the lost things happily, and swell in contentment that they ever were. At all.

Anyway.

*I plan to travel soon: and I may go back to the nowhere country.*