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Faith

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MEGHAN CALLAHAN

Faith

The fluorescent lights were harsh and jarring, beating like false suns with the all-too chemical hum of industry. It was so bright in the room it burned my eyes; there were no clouds here to dim the intensity, and I longed vaguely for the relief of rain.

There was not so much as a speck of grime anywhere, and I remember wondering if the reason that hospitals were kept so clean was in an effort to scrub out the dry scent of fear. The business men in their plain gray suites must not have realized that disinfectant and old bleach stank of terror already. Years later, I would keep my house half-shrouded in dust, and people would wonder, and people would ask, but I could not make them understand that the acrid feel of cleanliness gave me nightmares.

The waves were small, near non-existent that day, as the poisons dripped slowly into my veins, tiny swells of hot, freezing pain. I kept my hairless head pulled inside my sweater, and counted mica flecks in the tiles on the floor, telling myself over and over that if I ended on an even number this would be the last time, that I would get better...

And he did not come.

Everyday, everyday that I had sat under the cold administrations of the needle, he had been there with me, burning blue eyes and angel bones of his back beneath the thin cotton of his shirts. We did not speak; I did not know his name. But often we smiled, and once or twice when I had started crying, he had reached across the aisle and taken my hand. We must have been a strange sight, cold fingers intertwined, twin IV drips of toxins running up our sleeves, gaunt frames bent towards one another in a gesture of prayer.

Someone asked where the boy was, and the nurse, lurking with her clipboard in the corner, shook her head. The look she gave, half-pity, half-sorrow, over the lipstick smudge of her mouth, was more than I could stomach. Other words followed then, but they were meaningless noise, like wind chimes, and I returned to my counting.

I was years later before I would cry for him.

I did not cry when the tests came back negative, and I left the rectangular prison of the hospital for the last time.

I did not cry the first day I brushed my hair again, an unruly short tuft on my head, like grass.

I did not cry at my graduation, not even after the party, when only the drooping roses and I remained.

I did not cry when I moved from home with everything I owned in small brown boxes, sealed in and quiet.

And I did not cry when the man with the slow voice and warm dark eyes asked me to be his wife.

It was fourteen and a half years later, when I was being wheeled into the hospital once more, that I saw him again. I drew in breath to push, and there he was. His smile was the same, the sky-blueness of his eyes like the mirrors I remembered, and his hair had grown in. It was golden.

And I wept then, not for the pain, but because he gave me strength to bear my daughter, strength to look into her small face and feel that the world I gave her was not all hell, strength to see there was a heaven beyond the circles of emptiness we knew. When he turned to go, the angel bones on his back were gone.

Two long wings sprouted along his spine instead, curving in perfect white clarity, beaming with the cleanliness that was not agony and the purity that did not know sorrow.

And I cried.

And that day, I named my daughter Faith.