

Small Worlds

One of us was young and sick, the other old

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It began with pneumonia. The inflammation provoked a pneumothorax to deflate my left lung and sent me to the ER. The first thing they did in the ER was to cut a hole in my side, shimmy a tube between my ribs, and sew it to my lung lining while I cried with my mouth open into a pair of rubber hands. The second thing they did was to send me to the third floor, where the other lung foundered. Important numbers dropped on a monitor screen, so the panicked resident put me to sleep, intubated me, and handed me over to a ventilator.

For a moment I lived only in my eye. Of course I knew that I was there, on a thin white bed with my jaw squeezed open and my tongue depressed; but I was not in the bed, jaw, or tongue, not really. A neuromuscular blocking agent had paralyzed my skeletal muscles, most notably the oropharynx, larynx, and diaphragm. I tried to scream with it, the eye, because the rest of me was locked. My eyes are blue; they have always been this color. An emergency intubation is a fairly violent procedure, one its recipients rarely remember. The anesthesiologist did not wait to ensure that the drugs had taken hold, and I lay paralyzed before I lay unconscious. I wanted to tell this to the woman pushing the tube down my trachea because it seemed important, but I was far too small. Wide and blue and mute. I remember the stillness of my chest, my father's hands, and that scream gathering in the only piece of me I still inhabited. It did not speak or breathe or feel and when I woke up two weeks later the horror of it was in me still. They put me in a little bed in a little room, and I stayed there for a very long time.

My grandmother lives alone, in a small one-bedroom at the top of two flights of hard red stairs, in zone five, Beckenham, Kent. She very rarely descends the stairs. Once a day the telephone rings and my mother is there, but more often it is silent. The silence brims

with the inconsonant ticking of various clocks set to various times. She is too old to hear them or to worry at approximations within a half an hour. I can hear now, as though half immersed in her little bathtub, the syncopation of those clocks, the laconic contribution of the dripping tap.

The assault of a tracheal intubation on debilitated lungs may induce acute respiratory distress syndrome, or ARDS, a severe lung dysfunction associated with trauma that devastates the microscopic air sacs that pass oxygen to the bloodstream. It extended my time on the ventilator, in a chemically induced coma, from a projected three days to two weeks, and left my lungs stiff with scar tissue, with bullae leaking air, with a lining too slick and inflamed to oxygenate even an inactive body. It wasted me, that long sleep. Left me muscleless, soft-boned. Twenty-five pounds lighter, yet the weight of that body pressed into the plastic mattress, enormous, while the tubes burrowed in, feeding and pissing and breathing. They lived for me. With so much hollow plastic in me, the doctors harnessed me into a four-walled world and they said to me, *now you must get well*.

Hospitals are hard places to get well in. When I stood for the first time in that room, a nurse at either elbow, I discovered I had forgotten my perpendicular relationship to the ground, and realized with surprise how tall I was. I am still this tall, and have been for a few years now. Until then I was growing still, bones stretching up and out while feet expanded to convey them. The incremental changes of growing older pass by unnoticed, until from a certain perspective, they reveal themselves. Lying in the narrow tub in Granny's bathroom, knees bent and folded to the right, belly emerging like an atoll. Each year I found the view of my body altered; I sat higher, the island moved north, the legs extended, the knees emerged.

We came each summer, my sister my mother and I, to stay with her. Whenever we arrived I'd take a bath first thing, to soak out the airplane. Often when I was younger and more of me lay there submerged, Granny would keep me company. She would settle on the

closed lid of the toilet seat and we would agree that there in the tub with my ankles crossed and my hair burgeoning under water, I really was just like a mermaid.

When I stand for the first time after waking up in the hospital, for three wavering seconds, I know that it will be a long while before I walk out of this room. The first thing about the room is that there is no window. It is painted a color that is not a color. There is a narrow mechanical bed. I am plugged into the wall behind me and, by various leads, to a trolley at my left, which I imagine visitors might like to hang their hats on. Unfortunately it is very full and very busy, draped with drips and monitors that describe me scrupulously in numbers. I read them all the time. A fleshy vinyl armchair squats before the trolley. To my right, a toilet that I am not yet able to make use of, and a cheap unpleasant chair. When I can rise and walk three paces to it, I will endeavor to sit for, as my nurse puts it, "as long as I can tolerate it." A different parent sleeps in it each night. A curtain on a rail separates my capsule from the beehive of nurse activity, the corridor of the intensive care unit. Sometimes it is open and sometimes it is closed.

Dr. Saleh pulls back the curtain and looks at me with a frown inside his smile. "How are you feeling, Olivia?" He says my name often when he speaks to me; it is his daughter's name as well. He really says that first syllable, *Oh. Oh-livia*. I call him Dr. Sailor because that's the way the nurses pronounce it and because he gets around on the bandiest pair of hornpipe legs I have ever seen.

Dr. Sailor comes nearly every day, and when he does I ask him questions. They have always been about when I will be well, though the answers have suffered a series of postponements. Three days on the ventilator became fourteen and "after that chest tube comes out" became one tube replacing another until they stopped trying to take them out. *All right*, they said, *if we just snip off the top of the lung, here where the worst of the leaks are, you can be out of here in seven days*. The forty-minute surgery to complete this procedure took two hours and the surgeon had never seen such sick lungs.

They look just like liver, is what he had to say about that. A day or two after this inauspicious pronouncement, Dr. Sailor came in to tell me that I would need to forget about the seven days. They had become something else. This is all right, I suppose; in the room, I do not know what a day is. It is always now, for both the past and the future are unintelligible.

The real problem comes a day or two later, when the doctor suggests that we “talk about reality.” When he enters my familiar spare reality, in which it has been the twenty-seventh of September for thirty-one days, he finds me sitting in the chair. I have been in it for four hours and forty minutes and though my lower body has slipped forward, I am waiting for another painkiller before dragging it back. The good news is that Dr. Sailor wants to talk about the reality that will, he assures me, exist: one beyond these four walls. The bad news is that he wants to talk about its compromises. When they take the tubes out of my side and the lung holds without them, I can join the world with its future, I can go. But when I go, the tube in my nose might well come with me, attached to a portable oxygen generator. *Don’t worry, they’re very modern now. You can recharge their batteries every four hours, Oh Livia.* He changes the nature of my confinement, he makes it worse.

How long will I need it? *I don’t know.* Will I always need it? *I don’t know.* Will I be able to kiss without it sing without it will I always be this tired? *I don’t know.* The world that he describes outside the little room shrinks; I am afraid. My mouth stretches. Open, grotesque, turned down at the corners. I remember my parents in the room, standing there. They look down into that gaping mouth of mine, its grief. It must be as dark as anything. I sit there at its bottom and see a smaller world. They reach down and pull me out, closer to their own gray heads. They heave me up and I sit there like the scrapings from a dinner plate. I haul my haunches flush to the back of the chair and as my torso yawns its protest I ask the two of them, *doesn’t he know that I was happy?*

I had been. I had been blooming. I was twenty, fully grown and never younger. In the spring I fell in love for the first time and all summer long I bloomed with it. I was my own promise. The summer just before my hospitalization had been spent working in London, and much of it lived in the four tiny rooms of my grandmother’s flat. The apartment is sparse and sundry, private, solitary. And all the while there, playing endless hands of cards with her and drinking endless cups of tea, I bloomed, there, for a brief while in the close quarters in which her long life dwindled. We always sat in the living room; it was the only place that really accommodated more than one. There is a staunch old sofa poised in front of the television my grandmother cannot hear, and beside this pair, in the light of a window, a table with chairs. The potted plants my mother bought her, at the window, on the table. When I see us we are always at the table too. Granny and I are playing Remik. There is no hurry. My mind wanders so largely beyond the confines of these four walls. *I am blooming*, I think.

“*Yayush*,” the old woman croons as I shuffle the cards, “you are dreaming.”

In the hospital, I stand up a little longer each day while someone holds my arms. My sister times me and the monitors protest an escalating heart rate. Thirty seconds, one minute, one thirty, two minutes. When I stand with my mother, I’m taller than her. “You’re like the little mermaid,” she says. She means the one from the original fairytale, who feels knives in her feet when she walks on dry land. This seems apt but perhaps a little too romantic. I reply that I feel like one of the polyps languishing in Ursula’s sea-cave. I mean the ones from the Disney film. We are both right.

My mother tells me that the last time she visited her mother she had to clean eggshell off the little galley kitchen ceiling. Granny had put eggs on to boil and forgotten them; they blew up while she was playing solitaire. I see her, shuffling from the kitchen to the sitting room. She has boiled thousands of eggs, what can these few be

to her now, now when she is waning? In the hospital each morning my parents ask the cafeteria staff to boil two eggs. The staff do not typically do this, but they have seen this gray couple every morning when they start work and they think, *it is no trouble, really, to boil these eggs*. We all think that maybe I will eat my thousand eggs, and then I will be well.

Granny is very nonchalant. Perhaps this comes with living. A story: The telephone rings, she answers. She tells my mother that today, on her way out of the bathroom, she saw a dark man standing in the corner of the hall. Nonchalantly, then, “I believe that he was Death.”

My mother sits at my bedside though she is meant to be in England with her mother. She goes as frequently as she can because the old woman is fading, but she flew to New York instead because it seemed that I was. She braids my hair and pins it in a crown around my face; it’s filthy and I do not want it touching me. As she fastens one plait, as securely as you can please, to the top my head, I remember the man in Granny’s hall. “As securely as you can please. And you must tell Granny that she is not allowed to die until I am well.” I feel this. I don’t know for which of the three of us I say it.

When I leave my room for the first time to walk in the corridor, I look at people, I want them to see me. I have only ever walked to the toilet ten paces from my bed, with a nurse carrying my chest tube box, and plugged into the oxygen stream in the wall. In the corridor I look at them all, the nurses, the visitors, the women at their desks. Among them lies a woman on a stretcher and she is the oldest thing I have ever seen. She is yellow-white, a candle. Her hair frizzing out from her head is the same tallow color as her skin. I try to guess her race but it has drained from her, and she is only old. I look at her unblinking, breathing, breathing, rolling the oxygen tank behind me. *Do you see me?* If I am witnessed I am here. She closes her eyes against mine and I walk and walk until my father makes me turn around.

My grandmother, now ninety-one, has been sinking into

herself for some years now. She has shriveled down to rather modest proportions. Stooped and curled, she shuffles on swollen feet like a woman in a shell. On that first walk down the corridor I am as old as she. With each step forward I walk myself backward, ever so slowly, to the forgotten vigor of my youth. I walk past the other rooms and count the exit signs passing overhead. A group of Hasids is waiting for the elevator. I can’t go in the lift yet.

My father’s feet are swollen too, from walking and walking, each day to and from the hospital. In the corridor he holds my chest tube while I pull the oxygen tank and counts his steps; he has walked with them long enough to know each one to be three feet in length. I walk one hundred and fourteen yards by the measure of my father’s stride. Small steps, sock-footed, feet close to the ground. Back straight because I hate that I am curled and withered, and my eyes are wide with asking. *Do you see me?*

Every day at about eleven o’clock a woman pushes a cart down the hospital hallway and cries, “Newspapers, newspapers.” My father tells me that a sign on the front of the cart says NO CREDIT in big black type. This is funny. This is funny even though I don’t have the strength to get out of bed and buy myself a newspaper, and even though with one look at me, the woman with the cart would refuse me credit on any grounds. My father knows that it is because of funny things like this that I will get better. His beard has gone completely white.

I walk farther every day, I eat my soft-boiled eggs, another bouquet of flowers arrives. An enormous bunch—perfectly symmetrical, shaped like a teardrop, the taper at the top achieved by the soft green buds that cap a set of snapdragons. Many of the arrangements are like this: sculpted, ascending, morbid. After a day or two the water will start to stink like nothing else. This one, like nearly all the others, includes chrysanthemums.

“What do they think they’re doing,” my father asks the nurse who fiddles endlessly with my IV, “sending the flower of death to

a hospital?" He is joking, but there is no response; the nurse disapproves. When she leaves, he continues, "Oh well, she's Asian. No sense of humor. How would you expect people who eat jellyfish to have a sense of humor?" This is the kind of bad joke that I am too tired to challenge and that always succeeds in lifting my spirits. We agree that it might be best to give all my flowers to the receptionist on the first floor.

The last time I saw my grandmother I was holding two plastic bags full of dead flowers. My taxi was outside, we were in the doorway, and I was taking her rubbish down on the way out. It is difficult for her to descend those hard red stairs. That time was like every time I leave, colored by not knowing if there would be time for me to leave and come again. She apologized that there were three bags of garbage, and told me that two of them are potted plants that had died. *It is no trouble, no trouble at all, I love you*, I said. From the hall window I saw the cabbie enter the building, coming up to fetch me. *I love you*. I was on the landing. She had to explain about the flowers. "It is the one you love," she said, nearly out the door, "your favorite," yes, the daisies, "in Polish their name is *stokrotka*," the cabbie in the stairwell, "it is little thousand leaves and that is you, you are like that." She had to tell me this, there was not much time, she had to tell me that one last thing and she pressed them on me, urgently, those last words: "little thousand leaves that is you, you are like that, *Yayushka*, be happy, that is the thing." It was raining and there was the cabbie at the top of the stairs. *Sorry*, I said, *I've just got to take out the rubbish*. As I descended, the slap of feet, I shouted up to her to keep well and inside I cried, *old woman mine, love like water and I will grow for you*.

There it is: her life, at its end, confined at the top of the stairs. She leaves it three times a week to buy bread, eggs, tomatoes at the co-op on the corner, she drinks long-life milk in her tea. It is all right, I think, that at the end of nearly one hundred years and one thousand boiled eggs, she should live at the top of those stairs. It is

well that, for those short durations, I live with her. Enact in love and games of cards, with little conversation, a changing of the guard. At the end of the summer I to descend and she to abide. She will be there at the window when I return, or she will not.

It was never, I thought, a question of my returning. She has lived and I am living. Even as I left her I was blooming. Little thousand leaves, a thousand promises. We left it unspoken that she was at the close, that I came once a year, that a year for her was a very long time. But it was there in that pressing of my hand, in *that is the thing*. I trotted down those steep red steps, the ones she descended with a focus and a labor then unknown to me, when a year was as yet nothing.

There it was: my life at its beginning shrunk smaller than a one-bedroom granny flat. In the hospital, my life was twice confined. The first: I slept and woke in the fear of death and four walls and today, today, today. The second: I sank in the fear of life with a circumscribed future, with not just space and time constricted, but all my promise. On the fourth of November, two weeks after Dr. Sailor told me that I might well live in compromise, I walked down the corridor on the third floor of New York Methodist Hospital wearing bedsocks, a pair of men's long underwear, and a canary-yellow raincoat. A nurse said, "You can't go out without shoes on." I didn't have any shoes, but it did not seem significant. I walked into the lift. I left it and I clambered into the waiting taxi, without a sniff of manufactured oxygen.

If you are young it is very hard to settle for being old. And if you should fall open in front of those who bore and raised you, they will pin your hair very firmly around your head and take your arm and walk you to the toilet, or down a corridor. They have done it before, but to see them do it again will be a resurrection. And if you should be forced to make the effort, the excruciating endless drudgery of reclaiming, lifting, dragging that stone of a body pinioned there to

a mechanical mattress, to a trolley, to a wall, you are not going to settle for a compromise. You will get well because you want to live and you will get all the way well because, really, isn't that the thing?

I am unconfined now. When I lie it is in repose rather than in anguish. And in repose, thoughtless and alive, I go drifting, in that nameless accumulation of feeling, fragments of books and bus rides, nostalgias real and imagined. A slice of ham on blackened toast and card games, endless card games with grandmother; when I was a child I sat under the table to hide my cards. And when I drift, I wonder if that could be what it is to be old. When hearing dims and recedes, does the gentle accumulation of one's life, these lapping whispers, become a roar? I will find out.

Yes, I will be happy. I will be happy to love or buy newspapers or suffer, to live out the glorious poverty of this glimpse that I am given. I will hold my eyes wide for it. They have been blue since the day I was born. Throughout my sickness, everyone remarked upon how large my eyes became. *What big eyes you have*. For several reasons, perhaps. Dad posited that it was "all the jollop" in me, the drugs unfurling in my system. Or perhaps the face that held them had grown thin and small and hollow. But I felt it too, that I held them open, as widely open as I could.