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## *Taking a Stitch in a Dead Man's Arm*

I changed the bandage over my father's knee in the final month of his life. His wound was violet, and blood pulsed through. I never looked away from it. I swallowed my vomit when it struck the back of my clenched teeth; I was ready to swallow my insides as often as necessary—it was important to gaze at his flesh exactly as it was because I would not have it with me for much longer. I wanted to learn matter-of-factness about being this close to someone. The yellow fluid on the gauze around the bloodstains, the cortisone spray that would have made Papa scream if he'd had the strength: my stain, my shock, and my scream.

A brain lesion gave him double vision. Everything wore a register of itself, a crown of haze. It amused him to watch people walking around with the ghosts of themselves stuck to their skins. Papa's knee had ripped open when he fell off a ladder while trying to repair a broken window sash. Frantic to protect us, to seal every entry, he had crawled from his sickbed while my mother was at work at the Sunshine Biscuit factory and I was at school. A killer who called himself the Zodiac was roaming the Bay Area. He was sending letters with obscene ciphers to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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“Isabel,” said my father, his fingers brushing first the specter of my face and then my face. The rind of the moon cut through the window-pane. The wallpaper was an old pattern of “The Strawberry Thief,” with sharp birds poking through tall red grasses. Saint Anthony of love and lost things had an arm span covering half the top of the bureau, and someone had sent over a plug-in picture, with a lightbulb in the back, of Saint Lucy with her plate of eyeballs. Papa was forty-two; he would stay posed in time with black hair. He did not know how to guard me anymore. He could no longer hide the newspapers, as he had when Richard Speck murdered those nurses in Chicago. *Fear gives off a smell. That's how evil finds its victims, Isabel. If you don't give it off, you'll be safe, you won't get hurt in the dark.*

I told him he must stop worrying. The Zodiac would not bother coming to our town: what was here? Every morning I walked to the boulevard to catch the bus to Bishop Delancy High School in Oakland, and we passed the Adobe Feed Store, where my father had said that hiding in the sacks were eggs, smaller than the eye could see, waiting to hatch into vermin. And sometimes I had caught it, in the days of holding his hand when we went to buy chicken scratch. The sacks jumped, they stirred a bit, moth wings straining against the weight of the feed. Eggs and wings: I thought of death as white. Our morning bus passed the Miniature Golden-Tee, with its hydra-head of neon dragons guarding the windmills, clowns with big mouths waiting for a golf ball to gag them, and a little Wild West corral with a gate that gave out a horse whinny again and again as it swung open. What was in San Damiano? It sounds like a place with terra-cotta earth and a Spanish mission, but it was an ordinary suburb, house after house with those netless basketball hoops, with a gauntlet of stores on San Damiano Boulevard. People favored wind chimes in the shape of pagodas, which they bought in Chinatown in San Francisco, as if crossing the bridge was going from part A of the world to part B, and the winds blew in and tilted the pagodas and no one ever straightened them; there was

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always a faint music, a trickle, really, coming from these shattered columns of pagodas.

I was in love with someone who was leaving me his own lessons in being unafraid. James was a tall Filipino boy in my sophomore class who wore three-piece business suits on Free Dress Day and smoked cigars with the Asian kids in the parking lot, and once when Sonny Barger and some Hells Angels rode through, as they did now and then, James threw a flaming butt end at one of them and got flipped off but not hurt. I understood that the motorcyclist admired James for a moment, and it thrilled me, to watch how someone could go straight toward points of fear.

Violet Wong, my best friend, would get onto the bus with me at the San Damiano stop, and she'd take out the green eye shadow she'd stolen from her mother. We'd put it on with our fingers, and my lashes were so long that they stroked green dust onto the inside of my glasses. She wanted to help me be beautiful for James. I had written a speech for him, and he won the regional Lions Club contest with it and would go on to the state finals. He had not told me that he won; one of his friends did, and when I went to him, he said, "I was going to tell you, Isabel." I wanted him to bury his face in my hair and wet my scalp with his mouth, to breathe my name back to me inside my ear.

How could I explain any of this to my father—the odd, awful timing of my love? *I'm not scared of anything, Papa*. That was all I could manage. "That's good!" he whispered. "I don't want you taking a stitch in my arm."

"No, I won't, Papa," I said, and we laughed.

It was a joke between us. When he was a boy on the island of São Miguel in the Azores, he suffered from a fear of the dark. His mother had explained to him that the cure for that in her family, she was very sorry to say, was taking a stitch in a dead man's arm. The cure was horrible, but its strength lasted forever. "Forever" had sounded wonderful to my father, so he said yes, next time there was

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a dead man in the town of Sete Cidades, he would take a stitch in his arm. Nothing could be worse than the monsters roving in his bedroom at night.

My father was five years old. His mother stood outside the chapel, crying into a lace handkerchief. Since fear of the dark is fear of aloneness, my father had to go by himself to the dead man in his casket. The thread in the needle was white. Papa thought the man looked like marzipan, especially where a drip of pink paint stood out on his ear. He had died from falling off a stone wall, where he had been entwining hydrangeas through the gaps. Everyone agreed that the world fought back when you tried to make it beautiful.

My father pulled up the young dead man's cuff and touched a waxy arm. His name was Fernando, and his mustache was trimmed neatly for the first time ever. My father stuck the needle into the wrist and pushed until it dipped through flesh and emerged from under the skin, and then he thought, All right, that's enough. Two drops of fluid seeped at the prick marks. My father's stomach shrank smaller than a fist. He left the thread in the man's skin and drew his sleeve down and ran back to his mother.

It was easy to give up fear of darkness rather than repeat such a cure. Maybe it was some Old World remnant, sticking a man with a needle to make certain that he was not merely in a coma. At one funeral in Sete Cidades, a man had bolted upright in his coffin while being borne to the cemetery and roared, "How will I breathe underground?" Maybe the idea was to stitch the body to earth, so that it would not cling with its worms to the spirit trying to fly to heaven.

Death sinks a person's eyes back until they become bright creatures in a tide pool. I got up to go to my room, and my father grabbed my arm and said, "Don't leave me, Isabel! Not yet," and I saw, in the gleam of fever, in the water on his eyes, a terrible fear, and I did not know if it might be from him or if it were my own, reflecting back to me. Perhaps I was so far into fright that I'd touched clear round to the other side, where I could claim to be past it; perhaps I was a

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liar; I could stand that. But I could not bear to think that the fear might be coming from him.

For once I did not mind Momma's habit every night of getting out our glow-in-the-dark rosary set. The Holy Family statue had a hollow compartment to house the rosary. I held it under a lamp's light to turn the beads into glowworms. My mother snapped off the lights, and she, my father, and I handed the fluorescent beads from one grasp to another in the dark. Fingering this string of lights like the souls of infant stars, I finally knew what to pray: *I'll give up love, if You'll save my father.*

That was my bargain with God.

**O**ur Alameda County transit bus, #80, went from San Damiano through San Leandro and then under the "Free Huey" banners along East 14th Street into Oakland. Near the General Motors plant, we picked up the riders going to Castlemont High, near Bishop Delancy. They had Afros with Fro-Piks stuck in them and wore Angela Davis glasses and hip-hugger lace-up football pants, including the girls, with angel-flight hems. On their Pee-Chee folders they had penciled dashikis and black-haloed hair over the Waspy white kids in tennis outfits. We lifted our schoolbooks onto our laps to free up seats for them.

One day Charles Mayer, a Castlemont Knight with his purple-and-white letterman's jacket, sat next to me. Everyone knew him from his picture in the newspaper. He was heading for the NBA. He ripped out a sheet of binder paper from a notebook and began writing in pencil. Out of the corner of my eye I saw his writing, and I did not know what came over me when I leaned over and said, "No, 'receive' is 'ei,' not 'ie.'"

I cringed when he said, "What?" and looked right at me. I glanced near his eyes and told him about the spelling of "receive." He jotted it down and insisted it didn't look right, but I told him, Believe me, I'm sorry for speaking to you, I didn't mean it, but I'm telling you the truth: receive.

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Charles Mayer handed me his paper and said, "What else is wrong here? Tell me."

Every day after that, I moved my books for him to sit where I could help with his homework. Once when some Castlemont kids pried up a bus seat and crammed it out a window to protest the arrest of Eldridge Cleaver, and the Delancy kids were jostled around, Charles Mayer told them not to touch me. It had nothing to do with the usual sort of love; that was understood. He had a girlfriend and plenty of other girls after him. I was ugly, with my skinniness and battles against fright. We all rolled our red herringbone tweed skirts at the waist in a gruesome attempt to make them miniskirts. He was taking a portion of my mind, but not as James had. One morning Charles handed me five pralines made by his grandmother, in a baggie secured with a psychedelic-streaked rubber band.

He said, "Thanks—tell me your name?"

"Isabel Dias," I said.

"Isabel Dias," he said, as if pleased with locating an obscure country on a map. "I got a B on my essay about my future," he said.

My hand was moist around the bag with the pralines. "Thank you," I said.

"No problem, thank *you*," he said, and we each turned back to our books.

In that essay he had written: *This is my world at this moment. Everyone I meet is my history. This is the year that Charles Mayer has stepped into his life.*

When we disembarked at Delancy, Violet said, "What's wrong, Isabel?" I ran to the restroom, willing to let the smokers beat me silly, and I locked myself into a stall and wept. I wept without making noise, I was good at that; imagine me counting just a tiny bit as someone's history. How uncanny, too, that my father should seep inside my lonely hours: with the raw instincts of a small animal, with the Zodiac on the loose, I had found myself a protector on the bus, a guardian angel on his way to money and fame, far, far above anything

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I was, but I counted now in his tally of moments, owing to my lack of fear in spelling out *Receive*.

An essay or two later, Charles Mayer stopped taking our bus. I never saw him in person again, though I continued to see his photo in the sports news. I heard that he had a car now. Rumor had it that it was a gift from a recruiter because his future was so much on the rise.

I studied my mother the way I looked at the eyes and blood of my father, to preserve her as she was right then, down to the safflower oil with its faint scent that she rubbed into her skin. Already, still young, her skin was overly set, like the gel on a photo negative, and her light brown hair was thinning, and her glance seemed not to be owning things but making blank spaces where she looked, and I forgave her, I never thought that not seeing me meant that she did not love me. She could hardly bear to look at my father. I would make watery soup but she refused it. Right through her skin it was poking out, the dryness in her bones. When she curled up next to my father on their bed, I took off her shoes and set them upright on the carpet, where they exhaled her entire day of standing and picking the pink marshmallow cookies off the conveyor belt and putting them bottom to bottom inside the compartments of a box. The Sunshine people let the workers eat all they wanted, but one week we had devoured four boxes of pink cookies and three boxes of Sunshine cheese crackers on purpose, to break the habit of wanting any more.

Momma, dozing next to my father, would give a startled shudder of remembering me, and with her eyes still shut, not looking at either of us for fear of dying of it, she let me crawl between her and Papa. Their silver carpet was bare, stripped to its gums. Somehow the roses on the carpet had worn themselves onto the bottoms of our shoes, but since we saw no roses on our shoes I think they must have gone up into our feet, roses inside my mother's feet and climbing inside her sore calves as she stood at the factory.

When I roused myself to go off to my own bed, I could not sleep.

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Suddenly the dark drifted into a white blindness, like the belly of a night turned inside out. I got up in the white sac of night to clean the green leather couch, Comet on a rag that made the green pale. The majolica Christ child over the stove, inside His ring of majolica fruit, had collected streaks of grease, too far to reach.

I piled bedclothes on top of myself and put my arms and legs around them and thought of them as a man, and I thrust around like a stupid fish on land, and that made me feel worse, because a man would move in ways beyond predicting. Even then I suspected that when a woman got to be experienced in love, that was the point—for him to surprise you; the very touch of love was a plunging reminder of the unknown, the same unknown I carried with me now.

I heard that James came in third in the state finals of the speech contest held by the Lions Club. I was about to round the corner to find him at his locker, to tell him that he had gone quite far with my speech and should not think of it as failing. I decided this would not violate my vow to give him up. I stopped when I heard his voice say, “Deborah, I’m dying to fuck you.” And thereafter I saw him with this girl, who had long blond hair that she plaited and undid so that it held a ripple. Her rouge compact fell out of her purse in the bathroom, and I kept it: Mauve Turbulence.

In religion class Sister Miriam showed a filmstrip about sex, in which a priest’s voice-over affixed every act of physical love onto a scale. “Looking at, talking to, walking with” was at the end marked “Early Stage of Arousal.” “S.I.”—for “sexual intercourse”—was at the far other end, in the Marriage part of the scale. The projector went Ping! whenever Sister Miriam had to move the filmstrip. The narrating priest said cheerily, “I really don’t know where to put the fondling of the breasts!” and the screen showed an “F” surrounded by question marks that ended up straddling the line between Engagement and Marriage.

So God was merely amused. I had not even been on the scale with

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James. I had not owned this love enough for me to offer it up. And the pain I was in meant I had not even truly surrendered the nothing I had. But what of any of it? My father might be saved now, but there comes a time when such a prayer is always laughed at.

My lungs flattened so that it was impossible to get air into the bellows of them. I took an early bus home and crawled onto the bed where my father lay with his pounding double vision. I did not speak; I tried to get some breath into me so I would not die. He put his hand on my hair—kindly, though I had failed him. My glasses fell off and the birds on the wall, the strawberry thieves, blurred into a red ironworks; it was almost pretty. He said that he'd been wrong his whole life; taking a stitch in a dead man's arm hadn't been about fear of the dark.

Was I listening to him? Was I?

I moved a shoulder a bit to signal him yes.

It was about leaving behind the curse of waiting. "Waiting is the fear you have to get over, Isabel," said my father, so lightly I barely heard him. It frightened me that he could hear my heart battering its way onto the sheet. "Don't wait for anyone." Because waiting was darkness, having no imagination to see beyond the fallen curtain, where you were right then. But when you were young and looking at a dead man, and actually sticking it to him, you were saying that it wasn't your time to die, it was your time to enter your better and better future.

There were so many cracks in our house that I was sure that water ebbed in while we slept, filling every room to the ceiling. The Zodiac got in through one of the cracks but we fought him, and his knife, instead of killing us, opened gills on our sides and we could breathe.



The Zodiac had a fear of drowning and swam away. My mirrored vanity plate of lavender soaps and vanilla cologne got swept up in a vortex of water. My father had been a champion ocean swimmer, and this, to him, was child's play. This was nothing, getting to dance

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underwater until morning, when the water receded and daylight began and a string of water was coming out of our mouths, connecting whatever had gone on in our heads in the night to our pillows.

My mother and I threw out the newspapers, though my father could no longer read. We had to protect him from the latest: the Zodiac had written a letter that said: *Ha! Ha! Ha! Your pigs can't catch me!! When a busload of Catholic kiddies step off in their uniforms I'll go pop! pop! and I am going to find me some niggers, too.*

My #80 bus, with Delancy and Castlemont students, was a gift box, wrapped and delivered, for the Zodiac. Everyone thought this, but no one figured we should worry. The Zodiac would stay in San Francisco. Surely death would not trouble itself to stalk us on this one obscure line from San Damiano to Oakland.

Death was too busy, death was in my father's body. I stitched my gaze to my father's when he yelled, "Isabel!" He looked straight into me, and I looked back, into the iris and nerves.

When he died my mother insisted on a simple, closed-coffin affair, no flinging ourselves at the dead, no kisses that drew back embalming paint. But at his wake I almost fainted from the smell of the casseroles, the Chinese noodles baked over ground beef and peas, the lasagnas oozing like a cutaway of magnified muscle, the Boston cream pies leaking their middles—I stopped eating for days, and then, all at once, my bones shook as if my father were shaking me, I saw black puddles moving along the floor and sticking together to make odd black-water animals, and I could not wait to eat; I ate, my mother said, like someone who was going to be shot in the morning.

As a girl I had attended a school run by Carmelite nuns from Spain who told us stories about their parents being killed in the civil war. Once a year we filed into the convent's chapel and the priest held out a black speck housed under a glass swollen like a belly. We had to kiss the glass over this black jot, which was a particle of bone from the founder of the order.

How had this bone chip been obtained? What part of the body was it from?

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Why did we turn the color of night down to our bones when we died?

There is always some way in which we lend ourselves to taking a stitch in the body of the dead. Someone had taken not a needle but a knife and carved into bones; I, for my part, had long ago stitched my breath to the glass over a fragment of a woman.

At school Violet said, "Isabel! Did you know that *all* sounds *ever* spoken stay on the waves hiding inside the air?"

And so I stepped outdoors until the blue sky bent to find me, to hold a curve against my ears that was my father saying, *Here I am, my dear, for my love for you is not merely in one world but all worlds.* It would be just like him to find a way to speak barely above a breeze; it had to be gentle because it was for me. And when birds flew with inclined wings, the air that planed off their feathers said, *Do not wait. Fear nothing.*

My mother would sit in dark rooms and not move. In the living room the dotted Swiss curtains bulged out when air blew in through the screens. It was as if the air had shape, and the curtains were stretching themselves over it. "Shall we go for a walk, Momma?" I asked, and out we ventured under the birds in the sky, stunned and silent, but at a distance I imagine we must have seemed to be striding quite fearlessly down the road. I could not rescue my father, but for now I could rescue her: I had won my bargain, it seemed; I had kept my father with me.

While walking down Redwood Road to the bus stop on San Damiano Boulevard, I noticed a car—maybe a station wagon—going in one driveway, pulling out, going into the driveway of the next house, pulling out. Someone was following me, entering and idling for a moment in every driveway so that he could stay behind me. I walked a little faster and stepped closer to the curb. Hardly any other cars were out at that hour, still dark, just after six. I was wearing my trench coat over my uniform, with the fringe of