

The Package

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My daughter Emily, nine-years-old, lies in the hospital again with a bout of November pneumonia I've come to understand as scheduled. I am home for the afternoon, home to wash away the sweat that coats my skin during every hospital stay, even as I shiver at night under issued blankets.

I find a yellow triplicate slip posted between the screen door and the main one, informing me of a package I must sign for at the post office. Here is yet another thing for which I must assume responsibility. Still, for a moment, my thoughts dart upward, like a school of minnows racing for a bit of color bobbing on the surface of their world; this package might be small and tightly wrapped, and when I unhinge the velvet box inside, cut gems will throw prisms on my cheek like a smattering of kisses. It would be from him, her father, who will once again want me, maybe even want her.

Or the package could be substantial, a massive, unwieldy thing in a shredded cardboard box. Inside, an elephant made of mahogany. When Emily comes home I'll prop her atop it, and we'll pretend she's an Indian princess, having the ride of her life, never mind the oxygen tank trailing behind us.

It could be an envelope from my younger sister, sharing pictures of her Belize vacation, the sky behind her so blue as to look false, her bare belly full of new life, her hair a coarse beachy blond billowing around her face. Or maybe her family has been to Aspen and there are snapshots of her stepson, who is Emily's age, skiing sideways downhill, his cheeks red with the rouge of wind, the snow spraying up around him like confetti.

Earlier this afternoon, the art therapist helped Emily make snowflakes, folded and snipped white construction paper. They are likely the only ones she'll touch this year. Emily knows my moods well. She stared at my face, then started up with silly commands: Get me water in slow motion. Kiss Doctor Shimanksy. Stand on your head for sixty seconds. Now sing Kumbaya.

I pecked the old doctor on the cheek, smiling, but by the time I told the Lord someone was crying, tears streamed down my face the wrong direction. From this vantage I saw her how other people might, with features blurry and alien, though what's the matter is as straightforward as congenital and chromosomes. A century ago she would be dead already.

She does bring moments of merriment, cast a silver shimmer on my gray gill. I can sometimes forget, when she jokes. After all, I am a mother. I gave this girl a place to grow in my body, and in doing so, a home in my heart.

I tear up the triplicate then, into bits I let flutter around my feet. The package is most likely from another well-meaning charity: a bicycle, Disneyland tickets, a froggy jumpsuit that is too big for her boney body and with a sentiment too immature for her wisdom.

The scraps draw up in the wind, then skitter down fast, their journey stunted in blades of yellow, brittle grass. I am too tired for more tears, though I feel a familiar choke in my throat. What I want most is for it to be finished. I could say, finished for her. For her suffering. So it might end the oxygen tubes, the catheters, the operations, the regular bloodletting.

But I want an end for myself too. I cleave apart my wants from large to small, in a kind of negotiation. I want a lover, a vacation, a cup of coffee that tastes different than the one that came before it, a room in which I can control the temperature. To have a body that gets regular showers.

I don't dare wish for a healthy child. That might boil an anger I could never come back from. I should cling to her humor, her humanity, though sometimes I want her less clever, so as not to suspect my desire for her death.

I push the door open and linger behind the screen, my shower, my small cleansing, steps away. I see the furthest scrap of yellow made it to the street, and I will it to roll far, to be free.

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