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Pink Shimmer #301

The only way I can explain it is that when your child is in a coma, your own life is suspended as well. At the grocery store you will be walking down the aisles looking at products on the shelves and they have no meaning. You reach out to grab a box of tea and it might as well not be your own hand, you feel nothing. When you place the box in your shopping cart it is weightless, that little box of tea. You wonder if you are even breathing, and you find yourself pushing the cart through aisles like tunnels, trying to find some destination. After awhile you notice every item in your cart is red, just throwing anything in there, red, all the packaging, red.

Today, at the check-out, there were two girls with long silky hair and heavy makeup shifting from foot to foot, arms filled with trashy magazines and candy cigarettes and Lik-a-Sticks and a bag of deflated balloons. They had their heads together, bowed intimately to the floor, and I had to lean over my cart to hear them speak.

“Do you think he’ll like these? I mean, can he see?”

“I don’t know,” said the one with the blonde hair. I had been admiring her freckles, how they faded up into her hairline and smudged the tips of her ears. “Maybe this is stupid. God.”

“I just hope I don’t cry. I don’t want him to see me cry.”

“It’s okay. It’s okay if you cry. They have tissues there. It’s a hospital. Everybody cries at hospitals, even when it’s something happy, like when a baby is born.”

The two girls had been holding hands and the blonde began to cry and a dark line of wet mascara ran down her cheek. I recognized the girls. They’d been to our house before, laughing and drinking soda. Watching her mascara run I wiped at my own cheek as if I were the one who had been crying, as if I’d even worn mascara ever since the night we were awakened from our sleep by a male voice, impatient, saying, “Is your son Carl Jenkins? Yes? There’s been an accident. An accident. Meet us at Metro right away.”

I was startled when the checkout line began to move and the cart behind me dinged my ankle. I found myself surprised, I’m still here? And in a panic I had touched my shoulder, my back pocket, searching for my wallet, my keys, and of course they were there.

We live on a dead-end street, and I have to drive by the spot every day so there is no forgetting. But I often feel that the fog that night makes the spot where the accident occurred somehow a different place—like something you recognize in a dream even though it is not so very much like the thing you know at all. The blur of the air that evening had been both warm and cool, one of those kinds of nights, a soft hovering sleet filtered over my car as I backed out of the driveway so that the blinking red lights down the block seemed much more distant, like lights that couldn’t have a thing to do with our family, like the view of a neighbor’s Christmas tree through a bay window of their home.

After I got the call, I remember how casually I put my jeans on over my pajamas, tucking the hem into the waistband and covering it all with a favorite sweater in case I would be gone long. Because I have friends who work at the hospital I pulled my hair back carefully into a bun. I even brushed my teeth

before I grabbed my purse and left. I had pressed my husband Greg back into his pillow, told him, No, it's fine. I'll go. As if my son were only in the next room, as if I could simply whisper to him, *Oh, so sweet, little one, there you are, there.*

Our insurance no longer covers my son's room at Metro, so he has been admitted to a specialty hospital for patients with multi-system failures. When my son hit the tree, he smashed the right side of his face, crushed his ribs, splintered his femur bones through his hip sockets, and jolted his brain back against his skull so that daily it swells and subsides like some strange, underwater creature. I picture his brain flexing and glowing like a jellyfish maybe, speaking to us in flashes of light we would be able to see if we looked long enough into the soft curve of his ear.

For the past seventeen years my husband Greg and I have marveled about how swiftly time has passed since we had a child, and now, time moves slowly. Right after the accident, Greg and I would visit the hospital together every day, but now we split shifts and I find myself struggling to plan ways to busy myself as I wait. Letters I will write, books I will read. I feel guilty about these things, just as I used to feel guilty when my son was a baby and I regretted having no time for such things, no time of my own.

When I can't be in his room anymore but can't bring myself to leave, I roam the halls and discover all the things this building is, besides my son's new home. On the first floor is a VA hospital where old men shuffle beside nurses, or sit, it seems all day, in the waiting room, watching talk shows. I can't tell if they are the same men or many different men...they all look somehow the same. In the basement are rooms where people are studying for their GEDs and taking community college classes, or sitting in meetings for things like AA. And on the third floor are quiet offices with plum carpet and skin-colored walls. I never see anyone on this floor—no one is ever at the front reception area. When the elevator doors open there's no echoing voice or telephone ringing. No one ever enters the elevator with me there and I can't imagine what kind of business gets done in such an empty place.

I am drawn to the basement, with its bulletin boards papered with promises for cheap airline tickets and rooms for boarders, "Smokers OK," its flyers for poetry readings. There is an odd shushing sound that I find comforting. The sounds of people moving, living; the sound of nylon track pants brushing between thighs, of simple conversations disappearing behind closed doors.

Today, a woman in a citrus green suit and magenta lips catches my eye. She smiles, and her teeth seem unnaturally large and white. In this hallway she is like the splatter you sometimes see on the street where someone has dropped a can of paint. She is so much color in this gray place that people walk a wide berth around her, their eyes to the floor. She waves in my direction and I admit I am curious to see who she is waiting for, who has arrived—she smiles wider and it takes me a moment to realize that she is waving at me. "Hi! Are you here for the meeting?"

I have not spoken in so long I have to clear my throat to answer, dumbly, "Meeting?"

She taps a fingernail on the wall behind me. There is a piece of blue-lined paper, torn from a spiral bound notebook, with 'Mary Kay, 8:00' written on it in hasty black magic marker.

"No. I'm not here for your meeting."

The woman seems disappointed, and looks at the other people passing by. She seems displeased by what she sees. "Well. Well, maybe I'll just wait around a few more minutes then." She checks the time on an old clock in the hallway, and I see that she is wearing tinted green contacts. They are larger than her irises, and the green appears to be bleeding into the whites of her eyes, making them seem dark and vaguely threatening.

Across the hall I see our reflection in the glass protecting a fire extinguisher, her wide blot of color beside my stooped, drab figure. I touch my face and am mildly surprised when my reflection moves too. My cheek feels like an old sheet, the kind you keep around to help you move leaves to the curb in the fall.

The woman makes a clucking sound. "I don't know why so many people are simply satisfied with what God gave them. As women, it's our responsibility to make this world a little nicer, don't you think? No sense in muddling around in all this ugliness." She looks at me, and seems to realize she's chosen the wrong audience for this insight. She sighs, and moves to tear the sign off the wall.

"Wait." I hear myself saying. "I'll come. I've got time."

Her expression brightens; she claps her hands happily and leads me into the room, where rows of desks wait for a lecture of some sort. I can sense her giving me a once-over, sizing up my needs, perhaps feeling the enormity of her task. "Wonderful," she says. "Oooh! This is going to be so much fun!"

I am unnerved by the Mary Kay woman's closeness. I can't for the life of me remember the last time I've been so close to someone who talked to me about something other than my son. Soon I learn her name is Kate, "Short for Kathleen but please don't call me that, sounds too much like my mother," and she grimaces. She holds a fan of cards to my face that remind me of paint color samples when you redecorate your home; she is moving them from cheek to cheek, to my forehead, to my chin. "Hmm...I'm thinking you're an 'autumn,' with all these red tones to your hair and skin...maybe a 'winter' if we go with your natural color." Kate looks at me over the top of the color samples. "Honey, really, when was the last time you got yourself to the beauty parlor?"

I notice that I am not insulted by this. "Well...I couldn't say, really. I've been kind of...busy, lately."

Kate starts in with the cards again.

"Well, it doesn't really matter much anyway. I really do think you should go back to the auburn, it warms you up. That would make you an 'autumn.' Dear, you would look so much...more alive, if you wore a little color near your face. If you don't mind my saying." I shake my head no, I don't mind. "It's just that us girls have to watch out for each other. We all get so caught up in our jobs, and our families."

She seems to have decided on something from the color swatches, and writes something down in a little pink notepad she has on the school desk in front of her. "We all have to remind each other, Hey girl, you got to take care of yourself too, because in the end," she points the pen at my face and jabs it at me to emphasize her words, "in the end you've got nothing but yourself."

My husband Greg has not been taking this whole thing well. But then, I do not think this is something you can take well. I see him only at night, after he is already asleep, and he smells of Scotch. It evaporates through his skin smelling a bit like my son's hospital room, which strikes me at times as quite terrifying.

The flat of his back will be turned to me and I will want to tell him things, like how I fell asleep watching television in Carl's room and dreamt that I was watching television, and I want to tell my husband how upset I was, to dream something so mundane. I want to tell him I think our son's toe moved. I want to say that even though I know the room was dark and that the images of the television were flickering over the walls and bed, I swear I saw our son's toe move. I want to tell him how I waited for it to happen again. How I sat forward in my chair for nearly two hours, and even though we have been told he is paralyzed from the shoulders down, I was waiting. And I want my husband to believe with me, to tell me yes, it must have moved.

But Greg will not wake up, and I can't help it, my heart will quicken and I will shake him and in his sleep he will speak in a strange dignified voice that makes me wonder who he escapes into in his dreams. With a lilt to his voice he will say, "Yes? Why next to the table, yes that's lovely." I will shake him harder, try to force him awake.

"Greg. Greg, wake up."

He will laugh, mumbling, "Oh, why yes, and if you do."

"Greg, please wake up."

The laugh again. “Ah, haha ha.”

I will continue to shake him, and then he will whine like a child, “Stop...stop it...” But he will still be asleep when he complains, “Why are you always yelling at me?” His arms will flail in the space out beyond the edge of the bed until I pull him back to the center.

“Look at me, says Kate. “Five years ago I was happily married, worked part-time as a teller at Second-Third Bank, I didn’t know that man would leave me. Have you ever tried to support a house by yourself, with a teensy baby and two dogs, on a part-time, bank tellers’ income?”

She waits, expecting an answer, as if she runs into women in this situation from time to time. I shake my head no.

“No. I didn’t think so.” She is rooting through her pink case, looking for something, layers of the case pulling out and expanding like some strange toy that my son used to love, those little robots that unfold from themselves and create something new, like a bug, or a car. “Mary Kay, I’ll tell you, she saved my life. Saved. My. Life. Ah!” She holds up a tube of something pearly with gold lettering and a pink cap. “Here it is. “ She leans in close and speaks conspiratorially, “This cream here does wonders. I use it every day. A drop in the morning, a drop before bed...you always wash your face before bed, don’t you?”

When I see she wants me to answer, I nod.

“Good girl. Like I said, a drop or two a day and your skin just naturally heals itself. See how I’m doing this? Dab dab dab. Never rub. Rubbing only irons those wrinkles right into our pretty skin.”

My son was in a car accident, I almost say. My eyes closed like this, with a stranger, it would be easy to say such a thing. He’s seventeen. I don’t think he’ll ever be able to walk again. Or talk, or eat. Things I don’t dare say aloud to anyone. I picture opening my eyes and Kate sitting stunned, the tissues held tensely in her hand like little flags of surrender. I would say, My son, he’ll be in a wheelchair the rest of his life.

“Look at my skin,” she says. “Look at it. Is it not like a baby’s behind? Here. Touch it.” She grabs my hand and smooths my fingers over her cheek. It feels slightly greasy, and I fear my fingers will leave tracks like tires on wet pavement.

“Yes, it’s lovely, so soft.”

The things my son’s friends do break my heart. There are three of them, boys I never knew were even all that close to him, who go to his room twice a week and play poker with him. Tuesdays and Thursdays. After basketball practice. They gather around the bed in a circle and throw their discards in his lap, ignoring the shattered bones and tubes and bruises beneath the white, pillied blanket.

“Hey, wake up over there, it’s your turn, man,” they say to him. And, “Dude, you’ve got to pick up your cards, we can see what’s in your hand.”

Sometimes I will listen from out in the hall. Sometimes it is best to not go right in. Sometimes it is easier to not look at him. Easier to pretend he is silently mouthing some obscenity that he doesn’t want me to hear. Or is giving them the finger while he calmly studies his cards.

“Dude, you really suck at this game. You’re lucky we’re not playing for money.”

“You’d better watch out, Carl. If you don’t start looking alive over there, we’re gonna play for clothes. Then where will you be.

“Dude. Don’t say that.”

“Say what?”

Carl’s bed creaks as one of them leans over his body to throw a punch.

“Dude!”

“You dumb ass. Don’t say ‘Look alive,’ all right? That aint cool. He looks alive. He looks just fine.”

They post the results of their poker games on a website so that Carl can remember the games when he wakes up.

Alone in the room with him it is different. I will sit by my son’s side and if his eyes are closed I will hold his hand and squeeze. He does not squeeze back, but at least it is warm. If his eyes are open I will walk back and forth in front of his bed and sometimes it seems that his eyes follow me, like one of those paintings at the museum where you’re not sure if they’re really following you or if they just look that way. It is a frightening thing to not be recognized by your own child. It reminds me of when they are just born and their eyes seem to ask, “Who are you? Why are you always looking at me?”

When my son was conceived we were about a mile off shore in the middle of a dense tingling fog. Greg and I had gotten the boat that summer, and every free moment we had we spent on the lake. We’d met after work, and I remember how excited we were at the novelty of advancing on the white mist hugging the shore. After a short while, it was as if we were all alone, so strange the clarity of the water beneath us and the haze of the air only a few feet from our hands. We had scrambled below deck, rocking with the waves as we made love to the sounds of water slapping awkwardly against the hull. The radio had drifted into a hissing, white noise, and I’d imagined our bodies were turning the lake to steam.

When we resurfaced, the fog seemed less novel, more disorienting, smothering. We could see no other boats, no landmarks to lead us home, we turned and stalled, we couldn’t find land. How to explain the panic I’d felt, holding on to my husband’s shirt, demanding, Take me home. Get us out of here. I fear that this is what it is like for my son now, struggling to distinguish the shapes around him. I only hope that when he can, he will see my face there, steady, familiar, as if he had never been lost at all.

After Kate is done, my face feels heavy and thick with product, and looking in the tiny pink mirror she hands me I believe I look worse than I did before. The makeup says, Here are my eyes, my lips, my skin. There is a woman here. But the highlighted cheekbones, the shadowed eyes and the lengthening mascara all seem to accentuate my sadness, rather than disguise it. “I look so...pink.”

“That’s right, you do. Pink is the color of health. You want people to notice you, don’t you?”

“Well it’s lovely. Thank you.” I hand back the mirror, feeling empty after the experience, like I used to as a girl before dropping out of Girl Scouts—I could never get used to that forced sisterhood that tries so hard to make itself seem genuine. I was always happy I’d had a boy.

Now that she is done, Kate seems to not want to look at me. She is hurriedly packing her case, tucking the tubes somewhere deep within. I imagine exotic names for the colors she’s used—California Sunshine, Tahitian Rose, Spring in Paris—names with the hope and promise of some distant shore.

“Here, take this,” she says. Her fingers are elegantly extended, and in between her index and middle finger is a pink card, which I take. It has lacy black writing with her name and phone number, the words Mary Kay Consultant all in capital letters. I discover that it is perfumed.

She clicks the lock shut on the case and stands up. “I’m telling you, honey. There’s no reason to let yourself go. Give me a call anytime.” She places her hand solidly on my shoulder. “Really. You can change your life.”

Walking back to my son’s room, I detour through the main lobby. It has been renovated to look modern, and does not match the rest of the building. Walls have been removed and glass now angles overhead, amplifying every drop of rain. The meager light there is today is tinted a sickly green from the glass. I doubt this is really the effect they were going for when they decided to renovate.

There is a display this week of high school art projects, and I look a little while, surprised at how accurate some of it is. The crumbling pavement of streets, faces that aren't symmetrical. Flowers that wilt in a chipped vase. My cell phone rings, and I know without looking that it is Greg. Who else would call? We've all run out of things to say long ago.

"Babe. It's late. Are you still there?"

"I'm here," I say. I walk on to the next painting. It is a cat curled into its tail. I look at my reflection in the glass of the frame. I can see only the dark details of my face, the smudge of my eyes, the shadow of my mouth. There I am, I think, and when I shift my weight there is only the halo of a light behind me filtering through the crown of my hair.

When I reach my son's room, I am surprised to find that his head has been completely shaved. His skull looks so fragile, his skin so thin. I haven't seen the shape of his head like this since he was an infant. Dan, the nurse, walks swiftly into the room. My guess is that Dan is an old army guy, with his butch haircut and a way of walking with his back forced straight so that it seems his chest enters the room long before the rest of him. He has faded green tattoos on his arms and neck that seem blurred together, I can never make out what they are supposed to be.

"What's going on in here, Carl," he demands in his loud voice, filling the entire room. "I hope you're going to tell me today that you're ready to get out of here, because I know you don't like looking at my mug all day long." He nods hard to me as he goes about his swift routine of checking tubes and tucking blankets and smoothing the white tape that keeps all of these things in place. He stands at the foot of the bed, scribbling something on my son's file. "How are you today, Mrs. Jenkins?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm good. How's my son?"

He puts the clipboard back in place, and looks me in the eye. "Well. We've got his infection under control. I'm no doctor. But I think we're starting to see some improvement. I've been around a lot of people in this condition and worse, and I can tell when they know I'm in the room. Carl knows I'm in the room. And he knows you are too. That's a fact." He raises his voice again, in his mock threatening tone. "You're just being stubborn about waking up all the other parts, aren't you Carl?"

To me, he says, "I hope you don't mind about the hair," and he runs a hand over his own crew cut. "I just couldn't stand to look at that shaggy head one second more. I don't want him to lose his discipline. When someone loses his discipline, it's all downhill from there." He seems to take notice of my face, with its too-fancy make up for someone living in her sweatpants. I see it register in his eyes, but he is kind enough to not acknowledge it. "Alright then. I'll be back in here a couple hours more, before my shift ends. You two have fun. You need anything you let me know." When he leaves there is a breeze of movement, as if he took all the air from the room with him.

The silence after Dan leaves is always unbearable at first. Then, worse, are the other sounds, like that of the ventilator, and the faint crinkle of plastic and tape as my son's chest is forced up and released with each fake breath. I pull my chair to the bedside, and it scrapes across the floor in a way that I imagine everyone in the building must have heard, including Carl. "Here we are again," I say.

In three more days they will decide if we have to move him to a nursing home, where he will likely stay until he dies. Or, he will remain here, as long as they say, depending. Depending. I have not thought about what happens after that. If he is ever conscious enough to come back home. I have not thought of how we will do that.

We would need to install ramps, I suppose, and maybe we will have to push him everywhere he goes. I suppose I will never go back to work again. I imagine wheeling him down the street in the snow.

I notice my son's toes are uncovered on the foot nearest to me. How long has it been like that? Didn't Dan just tuck all these sheets in? I scoot closer to the foot, expecting it to move at any moment. At least a toe. A twitch will do. This close, it saddens me how gray his skin has become. I am amazed to find that he no longer has calluses where they should be.

The smell of Kate's business card in my pocket is overwhelming in this sterile room. I consider calling her, ordering a case of her miracle cream. I imagine her in her bright green suit in this room, opening her pink case, its shelves unfolding like a bloom, or a promise. She would flare the color cards out at my son's feet. She would thoughtfully tap a finger to her temple, then tell me, "With his reduced circulation, this gray foot indicates he has cool tones, making him a 'winter,' just like his mother." She would smile warmly, a little moment between just us girls.

I grab my purse. At the very bottom, among the pennies and parking receipts, I find an old tube of lipstick I'd bought at the drug store, feeling festive right before the holidays. It's the glittery kind, and it strikes me that I never got around to wearing it. Slowly, I begin to paint my son's foot with it, hesitantly at first, then with bolder, broader strokes. I blend an area with the pad of my finger. Dab, dab, dab, I think to myself, the shape of his foot becoming clearer now, sparkling, and pink.