

## ASTRONAUTS

The sterility of the hospital's ninth floor, the whoosh of the double doors into the unit, the hypnotic drip of IV fluids, the stacks of yellow gowns and gloves, the scent of sanitizers, the precautionary signs telling her precisely what and what not to do, the monitors keeping tabs on all the bodies tethered to the nurses station—these were all comforting to Julia. She wasn't sure why. After all, her husband had been a patient in the oncology unit for two weeks now. He could die. And how odd for him to walk into the unit so fit, almost in remission, carrying his own bag of pajamas and crossword puzzle books, and now be so sick from the bone marrow transplant that was supposed to make him well.

The doctors didn't discuss odds, but she wasn't stupid. A heavy foreboding would have been understandable. But the heaviness she did feel was more like a lead apron worn to keep radiation away from where it could cause damage. She was the healthy one. So why did she feel like there were worlds inside her breaking apart? Some days, she kept herself together as if in a pressurized suit, taking moon steps, mimicking gravity. But somewhere inside that protective suit, she knew there would be damage. Someone would come untethered. Someone would fall.

Not that the unit was completely a comfort, all ticking machinery and blinking numbers. She had glimpsed into the patients' rooms on her way to 907 at the far end of the B wing and seen the bodies with only the thin, pale gowns hanging loosely from collar bones, the hairless bodies in colors that didn't seem quite right, the bodies tied to IV poles and shuffling from the toilet, the bodies looking longingly at the windows or staring into the bright corridors from rooms with lights dimmed, the bodies lying down in beds with the sheets up to their chins with their eyes closed and mouths open wide. The sheets were damp with blood and saliva and dyes.

She knew this, just as she knew that clear, yellow, and red fluids ran to and from infusion pumps and drainage bags and urethras and veins. The arms were blue from needle sticks, unless the patients had port catheters in their chests. Those patients reminded Julia of astronauts tethered inside their capsules in the gravity of space, or floating outside their ships, looking far away at the planets they'd left behind. Oddly beautiful. Like those perfect balls spinning so dependably on their axes. All the pain and colors turned to soft blue.

Their visitors were not beautiful. They walked in an unfamiliar gravity. Their shoulders slumped. They looked poor. Though they brought sunny bouquets and travel magazines from the gift shop, their clothes betrayed them. The untucked shirts and sagging pants. The hats they held in their hands. The visitors all approached the nurses station as if to a communion rail. As if a nurse could wave a chart and turn wine to blood, a wafer to pink flesh. Even after two weeks, Julia felt its holy and other-worldly aura, as if the medical personnel in their pastel scrubs and white shoes were all angels at varying stages of guardianship, and there was no way of telling at any visit who would be beneficent.

But still, once in the unit, she felt she was as sacrosanct as any of the labs, an embryo growing the spine and nerve and bone she would need on her own. A Petri dish woman. Julia liked that. As she passed the nurses station, she smoothed her new, white button-down shirt over her chest and tucked a small pucker of fabric into her waistband. She nodded an acknowledgment in their direction and noticed that one nurse was particularly fat, the patients' polar opposite. How on earth could the woman lift a man, even a thin one? Lives were at stake here, for heaven's sake. Before entering her husband's room, she removed a sterile yellow gown from the red cart, thrust her arms into it, snapped on a pair of gloves, rapped three times on the

door with its taped list of precautions, then pushed it open with her shoulder, calling, “It’s me, dear. Just me.”

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Randall was curled on his side and away from her, with the sheet pulled tightly over him, so that part of his bottom and one long thin leg were open to the air. The sheet had settled over his rounded shoulder and ribcage, into the hollow of his waist, and over his hip. How feminine, Julia thought. She had never thought of Randall as having curves. How like an artist’s model, posed, the reclining nude. But bald. Though there was a sweetness to the round ball of skin that made her want to cup it to her breasts.

Outside the window, gulls flapped about, as if the patients could open their windows and offer them a Saltine or spoonful of fruit cup. After a while, they flew away. Once, a pigeon had perched on the sill for almost half an hour, looking out over the city from nine floors up, pacing the length of the sill now and then as if weighing life and death, and wondering who among all the office workers, street vendors, patrolmen, panhandlers, and babies in strollers below would stop to look up and witness if it fell without bothering to spread its wings.

There were no birds today, only the metal bones of the buildings and the bare red cross of the helipad. A mile or so south, the baseball stadium stood empty. Randall had been so happy to have a stadium view. At night, all the lights would go on around the diamond, and Julia would turn on the TV so that he could hear the announcers. When she had popped open a can of roasted peanuts, they felt as close to being there as they could possibly be, and they cheered along with the fans, even standing and singing “Thank God I’m a Country Boy” during the seventh-inning stretch. Their grown son, Evan, had played along, holding up three fingers and calling, “Beer man. Three Budweisers,” when an orderly came in to take Randall to Radiology. During the final

game with the Yankees, when Randall was still able to kid around, he had said, patting the mattress, that these were the worst nosebleed seats he'd ever gotten, and Julia had said that it served him right for pinching pennies and not paying for the good seats right behind the dugout.

Not wanting to wake him, she pulled a chair up to the bed and let her fingers drift over the drape of sheets, over the ridges of ribs. Though she faced his back, she knew that the clear fluid dripping from the bag dangling from a metal hook ran into his chest, and the tube tinted with orange urine was inserted in his penis. It was hard to think of his penis that way. She felt lightheaded, thinking about it, but still, a flush of pleasure at feeling warmth between her legs, a memory of moving on him without having to be mindful of hurting him, the blood where it should be, breaths that came and went with ease, muscles that could lift and pull and push and that felt wonderful when she stretched them as far as she could.

Julia wanted to reach down below his knees and underarm and scoop him up into her arms. She knew she could do it. For the first time, it struck her that she could lift her husband in her arms like an angel taking a soul, and she would have, too, if he hadn't been tethered.

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She had been strong enough to carry a man once, a very young one, anyway. Watching the blinking numbers on monitors, she remembered that when their son Evan was eight, Randall had built him a spaceship in their backyard, which was the envy of all the neighborhood boys for almost the entire summer. Randall and Evan had spent weeks before the end of the school year, when Evan should have been practicing math problems and writing his social studies essay, building the spaceship out of odds and ends from the garage. Boards, shingles, switches, lights hooked to a nine-volt battery, parts from a disassembled go-cart, an AM/FM radio, cables and wires, rain gutters and mesh, and gold and silver spray paint. A piece of sheet metal bent into a

cone was attached at either end. She had to admit the spaceship was beautiful. She could almost believe it would fly.

Most impressive, Randall had, with a system of ropes and pulleys, rigged the spaceship so that it could be lifted up into the branches of the double-trunk oak tree. Julia stood on the back porch, not sure whether to worry more about the tree or the ship's crew jumping with excitement in the backyard. Randall reassured her as the ship strained against the branches and the rope ladder floated from the hatch door to the zinnia bed below. "This baby is built for warp speed, woman, built to go where no man has gone before." The boys bounced under its shadow, yelling "the final frontier" and "beam me up, Scotty."

The muscles in Randall's arms were hard and defined under his tanned skin as he pulled the ropes. His back was thick with muscle, too. No curve at his waist. No weakness. He was square and strong, all his lines like knotted rope, and she believed him. Maybe not that the ship would go where no man had gone before, but that it would at least hold fast under the weight of its crew.

Julia was there, not Randall, when one of the ropes broke and one cone tipped earthward, spilling Evan through his world of galaxies and warp-speed ships onto the ground. Julia saw none of this. No milky ways. No cloud cushion. No angels. No cables. She saw her son spill like dice shaken from a cup onto a craps table, and not like a boy at all. He made no sound for what seemed far too long after he fell, from the moment Julia was frozen at the kitchen window through the long moments it took for her to run to him, while springs and switches and batteries and old cushions fell on top of him. She couldn't tell what part of him had hit the ground first. Had he known to cover his face, to block his head with his arms, to roll? Weren't young bones flexible? She scooped him up in her arms and smoothed the hair from his face, looking for

bumps, for blood. For another long moment, he looked at her blankly with not one shred of recognition on his face, until the branch of the oak where the other end of the spaceship had been tied began to crack like a world breaking apart, and she staggered to her feet with Evan and ran from where she knew the ship and the thick branch and all its small branches and leaves would fall. The larger branches missed them, but a small one scraped the skin from the back of her head and neck, and later left a small white scar under the hair at her nape.

She breathed shuddering breaths, again looked into Evan's eyes, and gently slapped his cheeks. Suddenly, his eyes focused and he jerked out of her arms and stood up straight. "My spaceship," he howled. "It's totally ruined." Julia trembled and sank to the ground. Blood ran from Evans' skinned elbows and knees, and a bump did appear on his forehead, but he didn't seem to notice at all. Instead, he marched through the leafy oak branches, mechanical debris, and the frayed rope that had held it all together, and kicked at the remains of the ship, over and over.

How like a man he seemed in that moment, how determined and how angry, and how little he could do to make it all right. Julia waded through the stuff, just as Evan had done, and gave a metal cone a hard kick. It twanged a silly cartoon twang, so Julia kicked it harder and put a good dent in it. Evan looked at her and laughed, a very short laugh, then finally cried when he looked down and saw the trails of blood on his shins. Julia took him inside to the bathroom with its shelf of mercurochrome and bandages, while picturing Randall's beautiful strong arms pulling the ropes and hoisting the spaceship into air, and how, later that night, those arms had held her so tightly.

After Evan and the spaceship fell, she looked at those arms often, calibrating their strength, calculating what they were capable of. And she would move from room to room in their

house lifting things, stacks of books and small tables at first, then armchairs and dressers.

Always testing.

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How could he do this to her? How could he build such things? Things that, in the end, would all fall down from. Nothing held. Everything broke. She rose from the visitor's chair, trembling with something between strength and anger. "Randall, I'm here." He grunted in his medicated sleep. "Are you comfortable, dear?" She slipped one arm under his back and the other under his knees. His skin was cool and thin, so that everything below the surface could be felt. Palpated, the doctors said. Yes, she could do this. She pulled him close to her chest and lifted. Randall's head sagged over the crook of her arm, and his feet swung so that keeping her balance was hard, but up he came, maybe just inches, but still, up he came. As if Julia had overcome gravity and all the planets had stopped on their axes, for one moment. She knew she was not that strong, not on her own.

The infusion pump began beeping just as she clenched him to her, clear of the bed. Whatever had been in the collapsed clear bag would now have to be replaced. She held him to her until the nurse tapped on the door and entered without waiting for a response, snapping on a pair of purple gloves. It was the fat nurse. Julia released her husband slowly, gently, onto the bed and slid her arms away from him.

"Just need to get your blood pressure," the nurse said, then glanced at the dry erase board on the wall. "Mr. Wilson." She turned him over onto his back, and he awoke, licking his dry lips and clutching the sheet to his groin.

Julia pointed to the blinking light and beeping machinery. "Will you be changing that?"

"A nurse on the next shift will take care of it."

The woman plugged in the blood pressure machine and wrapped the cuff around Randall's thin arm. Shifts. She could set her watch by them, but each shift still took her by surprise. Julia didn't speak while the machine registered the numbers, only looked out the window to where the stadium and helipad lights had just begun to glow in the dusk.



