

Lights

The first thing I'd felt upon waking up was anger. Anger at being shaken awake in the middle of the night of all things. All I could think of was how tired I'd be at school the next day, how late I'd be. It didn't take long for that anger to be replaced by anxiety. We'd shuffled into a taxi, donning handmade robes and for once my sister was quiet; my brother Scotty's quiet snuffles and the rumbling of the engine were the only sounds. The driver offered no information and wore a vague look of sympathy that made me uneasy. Thoughts of a fatal car crash or grand kidnapping scheme had drifted through my mind as explanations for my parents' pointed absence. I'd chided myself for the dramatics, though it wasn't helped by the realisation that our destination was the hospital. Even once we'd arrived, piled out of the car, and started towards the building led by a nurse with a bright smile that didn't quite meet her eyes, neither my mother nor father were anywhere to be seen. I hadn't wanted to admit that I'd hoped to see my mother awaiting us and collapse into her arms.

My sister Michelle glanced back at me, hissing a brief "hurry up." Her eyes held a certain hardness I'd later recognise as denial, that strong will of hers pushing away the truth she'd come to realise sooner than the rest of us.

I don't think that look ever faded.

The nurse, Cynthia, led us through empty white hallways lined with sterile lights. Those lights would follow me into my dreams for years to come. When we'd finally come to a stop, I almost didn't notice that the man standing outside the door was my father. No face so constantly lit with humour should be left so broken, no eyes that brilliant should be left so dark. It was enough to escalate my already rising nerves, to see him so at odds with who I knew him to be. I would never see him so full of joy again, not really. He left that part of him in the hospital.

Scott had rushed to him immediately, his restrained sobs breaking out into a full-blown meltdown. The whole ordeal had already been too much for the ten-year-old.

Cynthia had turned to dad then, her smile gone.

"Would you like them to enter now?"

He'd lowered his head slightly. Cynthia gave a small nod of understanding, reaching for the door and slowly swinging it open in one easy movement.

Michelle made no move to enter, standing stock still and taking small, erratic breaths. It reminded me of my mother's asthma, but I'd known it was something else. So I went in.

And there she was.

Oh. I'd seen then why sick mothers go to hospital in the middle of the night. Why fathers stand outside the door with tear-stained cheeks.

I remember very little beyond this point. Some ever ravaging storm inside me had worn away that moment long ago despite my best efforts to acknowledge it in every way I could so I might move forward, stop seeing her face in strangers and dreams. But the room, I remember that. Like the rest of the building, lights glared down, soaking the whole space. It was almost mocking in its brightness, cruel and cheery and devastatingly impersonal.

The thing that struck me first, however, was that it was cold, so cold.

And when I leaned into her arms, so was she.