

THE COLOR OF SCARS

"Close your eyes, Constance, and keep them closed," the technician commands, and her white chest spills over my face, emptying the world. I obey, but my ears cling to the tiny nylon crackles of her uniform.

White blots explode--angry spurting flashes against a humming in my brain. Flakes of snow dance flat on a black square; a television set is broken or left on all night, abandoned by the sleeper.

Pattern is in the snow. I can feel the scratch of a needle on crisp skin, tracing patterns, then gone. Behind my eyes there is no color; black and white are the same.

"Open your eyes, Constance, and keep them open." I watch a clean steel stylus pull across white paper ribbon, elegant as a fingernail; satisfying the itch between the creases of my toes, inside my brain.

There are two men wearing gray jackets, far away. I call but do not hear the call; their faces bulge toward me like expanding balloons.

"This is a thirty-four year old white female..." one says into a square box he holds. The other watches me.

"How many fingers?" he wants to know, lifting them. His flat, round

face is blowing up into his cat ears.

"Do you know what day this is?" he asks, and so I tell him.

He purses his fat lips into a pink "o", the pouty tip of the balloon, as if he has expected this disappointment.

"What color is this?" the first says, holding out his little box, but I do not know what color is.

They turn to Rand, my husband, and shake his hand. They gesture to each other and say, "neurologist", but the word slips away from me into fortune tellers. The balloon man presses his thumb into the box. A noise pierces my forehead with such freezing sharpness that I close my eyes and feel the bright points of stars, the sound - ZZZT - of white hyphens scudding across black sky.

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Dr. Francesca is a prize fighter. His street clothes riffle in the slip stream of his entrance like the silken hem of a boxer's robe when he makes his way to the ring. His followers trail behind and, when he halts, arrange themselves silently along the walls like caryatids, adorning and supporting this cathedral.

He is billed as Francesca, the expert contender, having performed this delicate procedure more often than anyone else in the country -- twenty-six times. A couple of decisions have gone in his favor, and the judges have called several matches a draw. He has no knock outs to his credit, but this is the big time and that's the fight game. He says he is a humble

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~~Residents~~
man. The ~~interns~~, who refer to a Francesca residency as if it were a sentence: "seven to ten with time off for good behavior", watch him with reverent eyes.

His green blazer is expensive, as definitely Italian as he is. Dark, crisp ringlets cover his head, just tinged with gray at the temple. He is very tan.

He looms in the doorway like a figure from classical tragedy, elevated by buskins or hidden platforms, but he is not tall. When he enters the room, flipping through pages, his teeth flash white, but he does not smile. He snaps the plastic notebook shut.

"She's having a real good day," says Ulla, the nurse, and hands him a clipboard.

He is a WINNER: his eyes, darkly alive, travel across our faces, demanding this answer. He talks to Rand, then jokes a little with the residents. He moves to the bed and nonchalantly squeezes my hand. The people in the room begin to smile a little, relieved to be in the champion's retinue. He studies my face, still holding the hand, and his eyes are turning black. From their cold depths he searches, listening and probing, for a chink in death, one thin shaft of light. Watching his eyes, I see that he has gone away, like Roman heroes into battle, without farewell. A colorless heat has risen in my brain, spraying little electric bursts that burn out as quickly as they come. Charred fumes trickle from my lips; foul words I do not recognize, sounds I have never heard. I can smell the residue of rage. All the people in the room are backing away from my bed with horrified

eyes, seeking protection in the soft vanilla walls.

"She can't help the shouting," Ulla explains to Rand. "She hardly knows she does it. All short circuits up here, you see." She points to her temple.

Rand is asking if these earthquakes of anger will harm me. His voice trembles.

"Ja," Ulla says sadly, the sympathy in her Scandanavian inflections covering like cloth. "She is afraid too, maybe."

The faces of the neurologists hang above me on a square, lighted screen.

"Can't you fix it so you get color?" my voice says.

"Television?" one asks. "Do you mean tel-e-vis-ion set?"

His lips are a pair of pudgy, horizontal rods, pushing words out slowly.

I cannot quite reach them.

I have seen these rods before, losing color, floating too far away.

They belong to my brother.

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"Pick 'em up, Connie!"

Alan stood by the snowblower, bellowing into the storm. His fingers, pink on the snowbank, grew paler, swelling until they were white. I could not move.

"Pick 'em up. Pick 'em up!" He howled at me, his voice rough with anger. I heard the painless screams and stared at his fingers, lying

separate on the snow. They were white as slugs from under the rocks, driven up and drowned by rain. The whiteness froze me to the snow. I listened to Alan's animal cries, sharp as crystal in the cold air, begging me, and watched the fingers far away, half Alan, not Alan's, gone.

After a long time I knelt to pick them up, as if I were in church, and held them in the warm cavern of my hands -- two fat, swollen rods, slimy and cold. Then I went to find Mother. She wanted to wrap Alan's fingers in a piece of gauze, but I wouldn't let them go. I held them all the way to the hospital. When we got there, I threw up, but I did not cry.

The other neurologist is sighing now, ruffling the moist inner edges of his lips. He sounds annoyed.

"Constance," he explains patiently, "I can't get you color. You know there's not a television in this room."

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Mother is allowed to see me for five minutes of each hour. One morning I try to find out what happened. She flutters around the end of the bed, telling me there was a seizure (a fit, she says), and then unconscious.

"What's the matter?" I ask, and she keeps right on talking about cannot talk quite, can't understand always, and the artery is broken, yes, deep in there.

"Why aren't I dead," I say.

She nods, a little ducking of the head, and explains there is a blob

of blood, like jello, around the break, covering it over a little, and she answers me that she doesn't know what will happen if the jello melts; yes she supposes it will melt, but not before the operation, she hopes.

Her voice is sparrow cheerful, but she picks at the corners of my tucked in blanket, her fingers darting like delicate claws over the wool.

"What went wrong?" I stretch my voice outward into silence.

"We just don't know," Mother says quietly, concentrating on the neat beige tucks at the end of the bed. She lifts her face, fixed firmly in the folds of love, denying panic.

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A nurse is trying to insert an i.v. needle into the top of my hand. Her hands are clammy with nervous perspiration. The touch of her fingers enrages me. I hear my voice shouting, a rough edge to the words.

"Where did she learn language like that?" a resident murmurs. "She swears like a Marine."

He moves forward to rub the back of my hand with his thumb until I feel a painful, releasing jab.

"See?" he asks the white-faced nurse.

They push machines around and arrange my limbs with straps. Rand said they were going to shoot dye into my brain and take an x-ray. Then we'd know.

"Know what?" I asked him.

"Don't be afraid," he answered, but he was afraid.

Everyone in this room is afraid. Of Dr. Francesca, of death and failure. He stands close to my head, looking at me. Deliberately I meet his eyes. There is not a shred of fear there, and I see quite clearly that he can't wait.

(In this corner, weighing 170 pounds...the leading contender...)

"You can stand anything for four seconds," he says.

I slam rigid into the pain, shooting upward so hard my teeth fuse into my skull; and it crumples, a steel hull destroyed entirely. Its fragments float by, washed away in turquoise. The color is everywhere, so intense that it obliterates me: the I, the eyes, all things, no thing, nothing exists except the color turquoise.

I am lying calm in light. There is no weight or color to the air. Water has no ripples. My brain holds no pattern.

He breaks through the swinging door, leading with his shoulder, cutting a path through his own retinue. He holds the wet, black square of the x-ray high, in triumph. His eyes are shining.

"Now I know where it is," he says.

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"Put your index finger on your nose and put the other finger in your

ear," he says. He is leaning against the wall next to my bed. "Extend the lines until they meet. That's where it is."

He is wearing surgical greens. There are sweat stains under the short sleeves. I stare at the hairs curling along the top of his arm.

"It's a bad place," he says lightly.

I know it is in a bad place. I have seen the sick despair in Rand's eyes. The neurologists have explained that I say "Thursday Thursday Thursday Thursday Thursday Thursday Thursday Thursday" instead of the days of the week. At ten in the morning I can talk to Mother. By dark I can only make the hard sounds.

"Kck," I can say. Kick, like bones cracking. Most other words are gone, not there any more. Color is gone. Where are the words? What color is Thursday?

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"This is what I'm gonna do," Dr. Francesca says.

He walks tough, like the leader of the Italian Cobras on the Northwest side, pitching slightly forward. When he clips the x-rays over the long white-lighted rectangle on the wall, fear flickers around the edges of his residents' eyes, anticipation playing across their faces because he could turn on you, this street smart sonofabitch, he could waste you. This is his turf; don't make mistakes.

He turns his back on the light that leaks through the slick, black

squares of film. He talks quietly to them, bouncing on his feet. He talks fast, suddenly throwing out a shout of laughter which releases their own. He is wearing a dark, short sleeved shirt striped with thin lines, and he runs his palm up and down one tan forearm while he speaks. His eyes travel quickly across their faces, seeking the assurance that his followers realize the war's on and they're going to go now and win this alley fight before anybody else knows what's up because they're in their territory here, a perfect place to meet the enemy, see.

His eyes widen to include them and then, as the pace of his speech slows, his pupils contract to sharp points in the expressionless depths of dark brown iris. Unconsciously, he takes a grease pencil from a drawer in the table and begins to play with it. Holding it lightly in his fingertips, he tests the balance, and it trembles slightly, alive on his palm.

"We'll go in here," he says, and the pencil makes a broad slash on the slippery film, the shiv entering silently, then ripping upward through the gut.

"And clip here," a greasy line to hold the leaking light, "and then... here," slash, "and hope we can get the thing out without removing too much of the brain."

A resident's voice lifts at the end of a murmured question. The pencil pauses in midair.

"Well, we'll find that out, won't we?" Francesca says, the sarcasm sharp in his tone. He pauses, still for a moment. He studies the linoleum

under his shoes, listening to another speaker, then suddenly flings his arm toward the bed in an impatient gesture.

"I don't care about 99.9 per cent of the time, George; the aphasias's there," he barks, exasperated. "She can't talk."

An intern's timid voice interrupts, and Francesca looks at him in amazement.

"Hell yes, I want to cut," he half laughs. "I'm a cut man, remember?"

He slaps the pencil softly against his open palm as he studies the x-rays, seeking the enemy's weakness.

"I'm confident about this," he murmurs to himself, and then looks up at his residents. "I'm confident," he announces and crosses the room to my bed.

He is watching me closely. My head aches with the effort to find a word. I know that I can say kick, kck.

"Talk." I say it twice, and Francesca understands. He looks at me without moving for a long time. I wait for an answer.

"You want to go with this operation?" he asks me finally.

"Talk?" I repeat stubbornly.

He looks over at the lighted x-ray and traces the pencil lines along the side of my head with his index finger. The movement of his lips is as slight as the pressure of his fingertip.

His eyes are sad when he begins, touching the points where the burl of the electric drill will enter, but by the time he has completed the pattern,

they glitter with the hard reflection of challenge.

"Alive is everything," he says.

"Go," I tell him, finding the hard G of a word I can say.

Rising, he nods.

"This Thursday, then."

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I lie on a narrow stretcher in a cold, cold room with white tile walls. There are other people. No one moves.

A woman whines, "I'm freezing. They're freezing me."

Two men are pushing a stretcher along a hall. The wheels bump steadily underneath me.

I feel the steady hum of electric clippers, brushing gently against my skull.

The last thing I hear is Dr. Francesca's voice:

"That's great, George! I'm ready to go here, and you want to change the whole fucking plan. Terrific!"

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In the dark I hide from Death. I lie very quietly, as wild birds and beggars do, to avoid detection, to be not sufficiently interesting to her.

My eyes are always open, spreading wide to find light. It is always black, empty. I am always alone. I stare for days until white begins to

flow into my eye sockets, stuffing the holes until it chokes me. I open my mouth to push it back and scream, again and again, staining whiteness with the sound of my fear.

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Alan wailed like a banshee when he was baptized, and the priest, smiling, said Satan was leaving him with the screams. I looked for the Devil behind the chapel organ and in the choir stalls; God, too, because the priest said He was with us today.

When he discovered me, the priest lifted me up in his arms and explained that God's spirit came down from above us, and the devil had been up there too, with God, until he fell down below. I wondered if God missed him, like a lost brother or some part of himself that he dropped by mistake.

Someone is shouting. The rough edges of the voice rip small holes in the black around me. The barked commands tear the darkness into lacy, floating shreds. Beyond them is the Devil's face, surrounded by a ring of light. Dark eyes are glittering. Lips stretch wide against white, flashing teeth. I hear Him laughing, piercing the black with rising, unearthly sound, and then I recognize Dr. Francesca, the WINNER who has cut his deal--alive is everything--and he shouts, "Squeeze my fingers! Squeeze my fingers!" and I reach up to them, (pick 'em up, pick 'em up), and grab his hand.

"Goddamn it, it's perfect," he says quietly, and the black opens over

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the high floating notes of my laughter.

When we made a deal, Alan always came out on top. I never minded. Once I traded him all the marbles I had in my Indian leather bag for his purey shooter. Mother was mad.

"Now," she explained patiently, "you don't have any marbles left at all, so how can you play?"

I held up the clear glass shooter to the light and looked closely at the perfect red, white and blue American flag inside. It was beautiful.

"I don't care," I told Mother.

"When you trade, you give one for one," she advised me. "That's the way to make a deal."

I look up at the ceiling, trying to see the color of the light; Now I wonder if I can cut a deal with God or the Devil, whoever. Cut my losses. Alive is everything.

When we went to the woods at Christmas, Grandad came out in the cold to Alan and said,

"Take off your mitten, Alan. I want to see your hand."

And he took it in his two old ones, stroking the smooth stubs gently with the pad of his thumb.

"You've got a good working hand here," he said.

It made Alan happy, but his fingers were still gone.

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The color of pain is the winter sky, no end and no beginning. The muscles deep in the pit of my stomach are clenched all the time, so tight I cannot make any sound. If I move, the pain will never end. Under my closed eyes I draw a circle around the gray. It glows a little at the outer edge. I tell myself that when I reach the ring, the pain will be over. There is no one in the circle but me, pushing outward through the colorless light of pain. I do this a thousand times, and I picture each circle as a scar on my face, like the battle scars on soldiers' foreheads.

In the dark a nurse leans close, her breath warm, and whispers,

"Why are you crying, Constance? Do you miss your children?"

I am angry because she has broken my circle open and left me alone.

I do not know children, and I am not crying. I am not afraid.

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One of the residents, Dr. Brooks, has come to take out the black fish-line stitches that climb up and over the top of my scalp. The stitches have been in for almost a month, and every time Dr. Brooks pulls a string out, my brain spits white flecks of pain at him. After each snip, just before the yank, I bellow angrily to blot out the hurt. It works beautifully. Dr. Brooks is not amused. By the time he has finished he is frowning down at me, a very bad patient. I am having a wonderful time.

As he turns to go, a look of mild interest crosses his face.

"You never cry, do you?" he says.

When he's gone, I lift the top of the tray that swings across my bed.

There is a steel mirror underneath. I have not looked at myself since the operation. I expect to see the marks of prolonged pain: ravaged eyes and deep lines around the mouth.

I can't take my eyes off my head. There is a wide flat shelf on the right side, as if someone cut a slab off the round top. And a hole. There is a deep hole the size of a Kennedy half dollar in my head. A thin layer of shiny skin is sucked down into it. Where the stitches used to be are pairs of dark dots, and thick layers of dead skin rise around them, cracked and flaking, ready to drop off. In the front chin-stubble hair is beginning to grow back in patches. It is white. I close my eyes, but I do not cry.

I meet my gaze in the mirror and recognize my physical self. The face is unchanged. My skin is smooth and firm, the contours the same. There are no visible marks of suffering. Still, there is a striking difference. I stare at myself and think about what it is. It takes almost an hour to understand. When Rand comes after work, I tell him.

"My face," I say, "is all yellow, definitely yellow," and he looks very pleased.

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When it is clear to everyone that I am not going to die, they hire Sheila, an R.N. who works at the Rehabilitation Institute across the street,

to take over the 11-3 shift. Sheila, who has special training in physical medicine, nurses people who are too sick for therapy, sort of warming them up for rehabilitation. She won't give me coffee until I walk over to the chair. She asks me questions as long as I can talk. Then, when I am tired, she reads the newspaper out loud.

There is a huge picture on the wall. I think it is of big and little flowers. Some are yellow. There are neat rows of tiny black drawings spread in rows across it. Some are closed tight and others are quite pretty, opening like flowers themselves. Sheila says that these are names. Names of my friends on a sign that they have signed. I know "friends", and "sign", but I do not understand "name". I look at the sign every day for hours. It is white.

The two doctors arrive every day in their uniforms. Their faces seem thinner. They call me "Constance" and always ask about the days of the week. Sheila usually asks me who the people are in the newspaper pictures, but I never recognize any of them. This used to irritate me, but now, sometimes, it makes me feel like weeping. The doctors always bring their square box and mumble into it. One day I say, "Don't you ever leave that dumb orange box at home?" and they looked very pleased.

Sheila says I am getting much better, that almost everything I say before lunch makes sense. I remember about "name", and we name things together. She is very pleased. She calls the tiny marks on the sign and the newspaper "letters". I don't understand letters. Can I make some?

she asks, giving me paper and a pen. Suddenly my fingers are frozen. I can't move them.

In the afternoons blackness starts at the edges of my eyeballs and moves inward like spilled, spreading ink. I try to push it back, but it keeps covering my eyes until I can't see the light, or the yellow flowers on the sign.

I have lost something in the dark. If I could find it and pick it up off the ground, I would be well. I could understand what "letters" were and make the tiny drawings and even talk sense after lunch. If I knew what I was searching for. I look around all the time, but it is too hard to find anything in this seeping blackness.

When Sheila picks up her pad of paper and the pen it is close to the end of her shift. One afternoon I understand something.

"You're writing," I say, and she looks very pleased.

It is suddenly clear that the newspaper is "reading".

I look at my fingers and say, "I can't write."

And I can't read--names or newspapers. I don't know pictures or faces. I won't be able to learn to write, read, which is which.

"I can't talk."

I say it very quietly.

Yesterday Mother brought my china christening cup, a baby's keepsake filled with flowers.

"I thought it would cheer you up," she said.

It is on the tray table by my styrofoam coffee cup. A little girl holding flowers is painted on the side. Her dress is yellow. They have told me what it says on the cup: "Thursday's child has far to go." But I do not know that. I cannot read it. I will never know what color Thursday is.

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Dr. Francesca's voice is harsh with anger.

"Sheila says you won't talk," he accuses me.

His eyes, deep in the sockets, are ignited like live, black coals.

"You can talk." He won't look away.

I stare back, helpless, thinking that once I could make hard noises with the back of my mouth; Kck.

"Cat," I say.

"Yes you can."

"Cat." I shake my head.

"Try harder."

"Cat!" I shout. "CAT CAT CAT." It is so hard to say it. I am panting.

"Can't," he says, and I answer, "Can't," exhausted, hearing my voice through water.

The water is tickling my cheeks. It is covering softly, not quite warm, washing the dirt from my eye sockets. I can see the blackness receding, flaking away and dripping with the water, out of sight. It rises in my

head and then empties itself, until the darkness is washed away.

"Why are you crying?" Dr. Francesca asks me.

My pupils begin to tighten. I see his face sharpen in the rising light.

"I'm afraid," I say, hearing my voice, clear as the water. "I am afraid."

He sits down beside me on the bed and rolls the edge of the sheet between his thumb and finger.

"Take your hand off your head," he says.

"I can't."

"Sheila says you've held it there since she came this morning. Why can't you?"

"Things will spill out of the hole. I lost something."

"Some pieces of your brain."

"I can't read or write. I can't talk."

"You're a living miracle," he says, peeling my fingers off my scalp one at a time.

He traces the scar exactly, in its horseshoe shape, with his finger, brushing the black cobwebs off the edges of my vision.

"You did that before," I tell him. "With a red pencil, your finger."

"You remember that?" he asks and holds my shoulders, very pleased.

He fits the ball of his thumb into the hole and presses against the skin.

"It doesn't matter what you lost," he says. "It's healed now."

I can feel it, feel the edges of my skull soften.

"Take off your mitten, Alan," Grandad told him, "I want to see your fingers."

And he rubbed his thumb over the stubs, holding Alan's hand hefting it.

"You've got a good working hand here," he said.")

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Fourteen is not the same as the other floors.

Everyone has the same horseshoe-shaped wound on one side of the head, a tribal scar which can never be rubbed out.

When I move carefully along the corridor I can see, in 1487, a tiny, shriveled woman with fingers curved into bird claws, so old that her flesh, veined like onion skin, clings tight to the outlines of her skull. A thin ribbon is tied around her scar and a few white tufts on the unshaven side of her head.

Next door there is a handsome boy about eighteen with a stubble growth of beard beginning. The white of his scar glows through his dark brown crew cut. Sheila told me he had a football injury. My eyes meet his, but there is no flicker of response. Sheila says he is fine except that he can't walk.

The retarded boy in 1462, next to me, cries all the time. Sometimes his noises are like moaning, other times he sounds like angry, jabbering crows outside a window. Often, in the night, he heaves dry sobs, without

tears, until he falls asleep. He has had an operation to relieve his pain. Today he is calling out to someone unnamed in a language no one understands.

I stop in sunlight to examine my fingers. I riffle them like a child playing a hand game, and it seems to me wonderful that I can do this. I lift them slowly, one at a time in sequence and I see the old lady raising her white, fluttering fingers over a piano keyboard; the retarded boy behind a podium, speaking clearly and forcefully; the quarterback cutting down the sideline, dancing out his dream. Moving the fingers of my good working hand, I weep.

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I grow used to the pain. It shows up at lunchtime, like a horse-faced acquaintance who pretends to drop in unexpectedly and stays all afternoon. It will last, Dr. Francesca says, another eight or ten months, but the prospect doesn't terrify me now.

I notice that Rand has lost weight. His suits hang on his body and he walks with a slight slump at the shoulders. Mother's voice cracks often from fatigue, and she speaks haltingly, as if she's holding onto something for dear life. Rand says that taking care of four children is getting to her.

I am rubbing baby oil into my scalp, trying to get off the dead skin, when he says it. The word "children" snags on a sharp edge of my consciousness, and I see them clearly, our four children: one boy, three girl babies.

"Baby oil," I say, smiling, and hold out the bottle to Rand. The letters on it are blue and they say "Baby Oil" and they are the smell of it, the greasy touch on my fingers, and the table where I change their diapers while they look at me, those three baby girls, each with her own face.

Rand nods, "yes", and looks pleased.

"Billy is eleven," I say.

"Right."

I am rubbing the oil into my head. "Remember when he fell on that broken bottle? He was three."

"Sure," Rand answers. "I do."

Billy had a pink scar on his knee like a little smile, carved there by the sharp glass. We didn't stitch it up, how could you stitch it? and it grew with him. It spread outward with his skin and muscle, expanding, changing color until it rested above his flesh like a white, coiled worm.

"Rand," I call and I am trembling, "hold me."

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Today I am going home. The morning paper is lying on my tray table with a big picture of Richard Nixon on the front page.

"What does it mean: Water Gate?" I ask, and everyone in the room looks very pleased, when who should walk in but THE WINNER with a pink shirt under his gray doctor's smock and a silk foulard at his throat. Our laughter is like cheering because this time he might get the K.O., we can feel it.

coming. He stands, feet apart, with his hands on his hips, looking at me.

"You squeamish?" he asks, his eyes sparkling. I shake my head.

"Get up," he commands. "I'm gonna walk you to your own case presentation."

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It is black. A square of white glows in the center of the darkness. The small room is too warm, filled with the rustlings and murmurs of strangers I cannot see. A machine stands humming in the corner. I close my eyes to avoid the empty screen, and I am lying on my back, falling slowly past the white flickers of fear that pierce the darkness.

"Here he comes," a voice whispers and I feel them moving aside, the slight draft that follows his entrance.

"This is a thirty-four year old white female," he says.

I open my eyes and keep them open.

The film is in color. The brilliant purples and roses of blood flowing through arteries and veins vibrate against the gleaming steel of surgical clamps. My brain is magnified and trembling, opening like the flowers in Walt Disney's time-lapse movies.

"...clamped the artery there," Dr. Francesca is explaining, holding a lighted pointer, "...and there."

The shades of pink and violet shift and change, growing more intense and beautiful. His voice accelerates, stops, the steel knife on the screen pauses and suddenly the screen fills up again with white. Disembodied

fingers, sheathed in transparent rubber, place an oval object on a paper towel, the size and deadly dull purple of a plum. The gloved hand opens to spill several items onto the towel. I squint a little to see what they are, but there is nothing but the plum to see. The fingers descend again and carefully place the black plastic cap of a cheap drugstore pen. I can see them now, white on white, short fat slugs, slightly curled and dead, drying in the sun.

"What are they?" My voice is too loud, an intrusion.

"Pieces of your brain."

"Don't I need them?"

"Apparently not," he says. All the doctors laugh.

"What's the pen cap for?" I ask.

"Scale."

Up north at Grandad's, he fed deer in the winter, when the snow was so deep even the tree bark was buried. One year when the herd came to his woods there was an albino with them. Alan took pictures with his birthday camera, he must've taken thirty. And when they came back from the drugstore, he cried because you couldn't see any albino deer at all.

He took his pictures to school, and said to his friends when they laughed at him and called him a fibber, "Connie was there! She'll tell you it's true!"

I told them the albino deer wasn't on the film but it was in the woods

because we both saw it.

At home I said to Alan, very pleased, "You used me. You owe me one."

The lights are on and the doctors are filing out. I stare at the empty white screen wondering whether the white paper towel and white pieces of brain, (which I do not need), are still lying on it. What I need is something I can use for scale.

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Before supper I walk with Billy. He is old enough to support me or run for help if something happens. We are both very careful.

I should have been careful not to look up into the trees, the green lacy network of leaves that covers us. They are so shiny and lively in the breeze, letting the late light drop through like golden coins.

"Why are you crying?" someone says.

It is Billy's voice. I raise my hand, startled, to brush the wetness off but he stops it.

"You never cry," he says.

"I thought I never would."

"The day of your operation I went over to Peter's for dinner," he says, walking over the grass, looking at his sneakers. "And during dessert Dad called, and I didn't want to go to the phone. I almost couldn't."

("Pick 'em up, Connie! Pick 'em up!")

"I thought that Dad would say you were dead and I would start crying."

("I'm afraid. I am afraid.")

"I didn't want to cry in front of Peter."

("You never cry, do you?")

("You can stand anything for four seconds.")

("Close your eyes, Constance, and keep them closed.")

His face is tilted up toward mine. With my finger I trace the U-shaped track of one of his tears, erasing it.

"I hate to cry alone," I say.

We stand still, looking at each other, and the dark centers of our eyes, bright with tears, open wide to let the life in.