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## In the Red Room

By Maureen Aitken



When my father and I lifted my sister into the front seat of the Windstar, I understood we had lost winter. It must have died mid-way between Thanksgiving and the early days of the month, giving people the acquiescent first shovel of the season, the inaugural whirring sound of the snow blowers. I expected a sudden resurgence—a foot-fall makeup blizzard—but the storms and ice shoes stilled, then stiffened, until a few warm days drained those final white patches into the hard ground.

I didn't notice it until we were in Ferndale, the first-ring suburb of Detroit. I saw the churches and stores decorated for something that felt long past. It was a bizarre moment to expect the white swath of land dolloped with Christmas stars and strings of colored lights, only to find Mary and Joseph replicated in front of the Catholic Church, staring down at a crib of blown leaves and brown water. Near them, strung to light poles, plastic garland swirled up until their green prongs nearly touched the low-slung, sullen clouds. The winds foreswore December rains against fall's hay-colored lawns.

We were together: Meghan and I, here with our mother and father. Meghan and I were older, and since we left for jobs in other cities, this holiday together meant more to us, those who knew our entire stories, who understood our pitches and doubts. Our father, with his bad heart, drove us to Beaumont Hospital. Our mother stayed at home to cook. It was two days

before Christmas, and we had withstood the meticulous packing of medical equipment, the catted boarding gate thick with the stench of greasy sweat, the snippy, inconvenienced stewards, and the long drive in. Though I'd let Meghan down in other ways, in this we would not, could not, fail.

"You got my phone?" Meghan asked.

I gave her the bag covered in her paints. "Here in your purse."

"My charger?"

Meghan slowly unzipped her bag.

"In the side."

"Meds?"

"Side."

Meghan nodded and closed her eyes briefly before opening them again.

"You're okay," I said, though I didn't know why.

At 9 Mile, she took out a vial of red liquid. At the red light, she pulled off her puffy black glove. That pale hand, once plump from a Midwestern appetite for cheese and an unfortunate side effect of anti-depression medications, had been reduced to an assortment of sticks and knuckles. Meghan lifted her head, cocooned in wool and down, and dropped the liquid on her tongue quickly as if she were a little bird, bald and pale, able to feed herself. Dad looked over and seemed relieved. With an innocence I'd envied, he surmised what I had once believed: this was cough syrup for recent pneumonia.

Before I flew to Brooklyn two days ago, Meghan warned me on the phone. "You know, I look thinner than I did in August." Long pause. "I've lost some weight."

No matter. I'd take up the slack. I would get green juices on 7th, pack, and get her to the airport for Detroit. All would be well.

I arrived at her co-op in Park Slope. I knocked on the door. She buzzed me in, opened the door. And there she sat. How I saw her. How she looked.

*Oh no.*

Then I knew and she knew I knew.

"It's so good to see you." I reached down to hug her as she sat in the walker. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said with a worried smile. All the months I wanted her to go to another doctor, to do it my way for once, all that was gone. Now she said, without saying anything, *Tell me I don't look so bad.*

"How are you?" I said again, my hands reaching out to touch her, to cup her hands in mine, to hold her, to be together and weep together and curse them together. "It's so good to see you."

She smiled but it unwound on her, began to collapse at the corners. "Can you get me a Boost? And a water?"

I breathed in, and before I put my bags down, I said, "Sure."

That's when I saw the word "Opium" on the bottle, and all of the blood left my head. I thought of entrenched histories, Afghan fields and the descent of Asian Empires, until it seemed nothing could be saved, not people, not moments; not even seasons. But Meghan, sensing my distress, studied me from her walker seat and said, "Can you get me a water?"

I got up. I walked to the kitchenette, leaned over the sink and inhaled the air drifting in

from a small window open several inches at the grate. As I turned the cold-water valve, it ached with effort. It was amazing, actually, how we'd constructed water distribution, how someone thought up the pressure, and the piping. I didn't know why I thought of that then. I watched the water pour through the filter, and rinsed the glass before filling it up and walking back into the main room so small and covered with books, you could barely see the crimson walls behind.

Now, together in the van, I thought we would get through this. I considered that Meghan was incredibly resourceful, and having survived this long, with one near-death incident behind her, we could brace together, a seawall against the storm, holding firm until the dull throb of turbulence departed, and we could return to our childhood home to sit between the tree and the fire, and turn our backs to this world.

*You're okay.* I traced the expression back to the rescue dog my husband and I had adopted.

The shepherd had been beaten and in an effort to reassure him, we repeated one phrase.

"You're okay," I said out loud, as if confirming my discovery. My father looked at me in the rearview mirror.

"Not you," I said.

He snorted quickly and looked at my sister with a bemused expression, *Can you believe her?*

Meghan shook her head, lifted her chin and said, "She's something."

At the hospital, two valets helped Meghan into a wheelchair. Our father insisted on parking the car himself. Royal Oak was one of those pastoral Midwestern suburbs with grids of brick houses shaded by thick red maples and knobby oaks. Yet Beaumont Hospital's security system felt overtly muscular, rivaling that of LaGuardia, and hinting at prior trouble. Five guards stood around a conveyer belt x-ray and a metal detector. Two of the guards lifted Meghan up and ran a wand along her body until all of beeps could be explained, and she was free to pass. I placed her bags into the conveyer belt, along with my purse, and walked through the metal detector, where I collected our belongings, and left the security team to await our father, with his pockets full of change and keys.

I walked behind Meghan.

"Mary?" Meghan called out.

"Yeah?"

"We'll have to call Ellen," she said, as they wheeled her through the doors. I'd never seen an emergency waiting area so still and unused.

"Yes," I said. She was planning a party for the day after Christmas, and she gave me names. But when we entered into the emergency room, she grew quiet. We tried to act calm, but I had a sinking feeling that they might put Meghan in the ICU, or a cage.

Meghan lifted her chin in the air. I focused my stare straight ahead, as if acting indifferent.

But I hoped they overlooked her matchstick limbs and sunken chest.

Under the florescent lights, she licked her chalky lips. The shadows remained hard and determined against her skin. I practiced what I might say to the nurses. When the aide came to change Meghan into a gown, I said, "We're just here to get blood." This comment came out far too sharply, as though I'd thrown the gauntlet down and stamped my foot in utter disgust, rather than set the parameters of this visit.

They were not nurses after all, but aides, two girls just out of high school with bouncing ponytails and clear faces. They wheeled Meghan into a room and one of them held her palm up and said, “We’ll change her and bring her out” before hitting a button. The doors, as large and wide as the eyes of Zeus, closed in front of me.

Meghan had told people at her Brooklyn coop that she couldn’t wait to get home for Christmas. That’s what I remembered then.

Nothing could spoil our days together, I thought.

So yesterday, I sat down on the edge of the couch in our parents’ den while Meghan watched television. I suggested we go to the emergency room that day, get the blood, and avoid a Christmas ER visit, when the worst cases would line the hallways, blubbing and drunk. I watched her ashen face, her eyes sunken in her sockets, her sipping of ice water.

“You’re a little listless,” I said.

I’d promised Meghan then the blood would fortify her, and she would feel revived for the holiday.

“We could go now and be home in a few hours.”

“I’ll think about it,” she had said. She lay on the couch. On a chair next to Meghan, beads of condensation inched down the plastic cups of Vernors and ice. Her white Mac and black cellphone rested against her side.

“I promise they won’t check you in. They’ll have to kill somebody first, which wouldn’t be the first time, Lord knows.”

She stared at the television, her lips pursed, turning white, a colossal sinking in her eyes. “I’ll think about it.”

Now, waiting for her to come out in another hospital gown, I wanted to bang on those doors and demand they let Meghan out. For a few seconds I worried that they could steal Meghan and not return her. I told myself this was insanity. When I looked down the halls, no one was there. The walls were painted in pumpkin and vermillion. Someone—a committee or consultant—must have advised the hospital to paint the emergency area in calming colors, colors of seasons and nature.

My father shuffled up.

“They’re changing her.”

He nodded once and we both faced the doors and waited, as stoic as palace guards. When those doors finally pulled back, my father and I shifted to the right, so the women could wheel Meghan down the hall in a thick and gliding bed that resembled baked clouds.

“You picked the right time to come,” the aide said to Meghan. “We usually get a rush at 3, and then after 5, we’re slammed through midnight.”

“I see,” Meghan said. The women had shifted. They were the same people, but they seemed older, long out of high school, with chunky wedding rings and hard mouths. They wheeled Meghan into slit A2.

My father and I stood silently for some time. Meghan fixed her gaze on our father.

“Dad, get a chair to sit down.”

He smiled faintly and shuffled on his feet. “I can stand.”

Meghan stared at him with her eyes of glass.

“Dad,” I said. “This could take hours. Don’t upset her.”

“Yeah,” Meghan said. “Don’t upset me. Where’s my phone?”

“In your bag.”

“Will you get it for me? And my charger?”

I plugged the phone in. I set it down on the table by the bed, right next to the landline. A quiet entombed the floor. People walked by, talking evenly. No one screamed in pain. No doctors yelled out commands, and no nurses shouted “Code Red” as they ran down the hall in their white, gumpy shoes. I needed a life to be saved at that moment. I quietly, reservedly, yearned for the noise of effort.

A woman wheeled past us, flanked by officers. She hit her fist against the bed with a muffled thud. She cried, but even this was quiet as snow.

An athletic, no-nonsense team of nurses and aides walked in and pulled the wheat and green curtains shut before one of them asked loudly, “How are you, Ms. McCarthy? How do you feel?” The aides were dynamic and upright. As they briskly got to work, setting up an IV, a monitor, and finding veins, my father left to find the bathroom. A nurse said, “Do you have a port? We need to pull off your gown.” In seconds two nurses untied the gown and pulled away the cloth, exposing Meghan’s port, and near that the large lumps protruding along her chest, the malformation of her breast, and the surgery scars. We told our mother not to come with us for the possibility of this moment, which would score her memory forever. A rage ran so deep in my heart, I had to turn away. I saw the shadows of bodies pass behind the curtain, and their movement sent ripples through the cloth.

“I feel weak and need some blood. You need to call my doctor.” Meghan took long pauses between her sentences.

I wanted them to leave, all of them, to rush their youthful faces and knowing quiet away from us. What had I done by bringing her here? These were second-tier suburban folk—a practical set from Berkley and Royal Oak. What did they know about our wild-west upbringing in the city, rumbled through in old cars, working two jobs to pay for college? What did they know of New York hospitals, and how they always took things: an appendage, a week; a pound of flesh. Meghan went in for a routine infection and left without a breast. When they moved part of her belly for reconstructive surgery on her breast, they lost her abdominal muscle and caused a hernia. She went in with hair and left bald. Oh, the rage I felt. I had to grip the hospital bed bar.

“You’re okay,” I said and I wanted to scoop her up and run from there, run all the way home. I stood still.

The nurse leaned over Meghan and said, “We’ll do that. But first we’re going to run Some tests.”

Meghan’s face erupted. Her hairless brows furrowed, and finally her lips hardened in anger. She was my sister, the girl of long hair, and stout build, strong and sturdy. Brooklyn, I called her. She could lift anything. What did I see in front of them, though, but Meghan now as raw and exposed, as bald and bare as a turtle whose shell had been ripped from her. She didn’t want the tests. By now, it didn’t matter why.

“No tests,” I said. I gripped the bed rail. They touched her shoulders.

One nurse, with a no-nonsense, maternal nature and layered blond highlights took Meghan’s hand, cupped in, and leaned over to smile in a way that seemed dangerously intimate

“Are you in pain?”

They all stopped. It was peculiar. A crinkling plastic bag went silent, as did the clicking and clinking of vials. One of the aides had his back to us, and even after the pause, he worked in slow motion, so he could hear the response. It was as if they wanted to know what it was

like. They wanted wisdom, insights they hadn't earned. They wondered silently, but I knew. My sister was a painter and an art therapist. When you reached Brooklyn via Detroit, you had other stories, ones of yearning, of forging ahead, of seizing and tasting every drop you had left. That was wisdom, too.

Meghan's eyes darted. Her shoulders started to lift.

I searched for something to yank them off this track. "Meghan, do you need pain meds?"

"Please, I need you to call my doctor," Meghan pleaded, and I shuddered.

"She's from New York," I explained. "The insurance only covers eighty percent of this."

When they pulled the white blanket over her chest, they exposed the first few inches of her legs. My father heard about the money and slipped back into the room.

The main nurse leaned over the bed and patted her hand. "You let us help you. That's why we're here."

Meghan rolled her eyes. She turned to me with such a small shift of her head, yet emphatic now, decided. "What the hell am I supposed to do?"

*Don't yell, I wanted to say. They'll keep you if you yell.* The nurses changed. They finished up their work and silently, as if on cue for a part they all played, exited the room. I saw the bed with my sister in it and felt ashamed. They only wanted to draw blood, to fill the vials, to arrange the IV.

*Meghan is a fighter. She always has been. Just let the tests go, let her retain this little dignity.* I wanted to say all of those things, but it was too late.

My father and I froze and looked down at the floor as if we were in church on Good Friday.

Finally, to break the silence, I proclaimed, "You can't get upset. You'll get blood and go home. You're okay."

Our father sat down in the chair. Meghan looked straight ahead, stone-faced, to the curtain, and the people behind the curtain, shifting back and forth, causing a small flutter, and leaving bits of their conversations with us.

The main nurse stayed, and said, "We'll draw some blood. They are trying to reach your doctor now. Don't worry." But this command also came too late.

Meghan closed her eyes. A tear ran down her face, but they did that now. It was hard to know the source. She turned her pale, soft head to my father and studied his quiet nature, his glum consideration of the linoleum.

"Dad needs a sandwich."

He looked up and smiled, lifting the side of his mouth, his eyes bright and sad.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

She kept staring at him.

"Don't be cheap, Dad," I said.

"Yeah," Meghan said, lifting her head and with a slight smile said, "Don't. Be Cheap." I looked at Dad, too, suspicious of his slumpy ways. I thought he might fall asleep.

"Is there a cafeteria?"

"No hospital food. Get him something good somewhere. A turkey and cheese."

"I can't leave," I said.

Meghan turned her face toward me. The depth of her stare made my bones shudder.

"Dad's here," she said. "You go."

I let go of the bed rail. “Give me some money,” I said to our father. I’d spend thousands traveling from Minneapolis to New York, where I helped Meghan get on her plane to Detroit, so asking for a \$10 felt like a good joke. Plus, it made Meghan smile.

Dad looked at Meghan and shook his head, as if to say, *Can you believe her?* He stood up and gave me a \$20. “Get me a coffee, will ya?”

I paused. “Do you want anything?”

Her neck and shoulders were glass bones now, but her legs were thick and swollen. They glistened.

Meghan shook her head.

“Get cream in the coffee,” my father said, and yawned.

My sister stared at him. “Sit down.”

She turned to me, remembering something. “Where’s my phone?”

“Charging. Over there.”

“Where’s my purse? I need my medicine.”

On her legs, I saw fine, thin cracks, with clear fluid dripping out here and there like small tears. My fingers gripped the bed rails again. What was I thinking? The monitors ticked away, the wiring went in, the world swirled around her, and I couldn’t leave her to them, not with everything that had already happened, not with what I knew about split seconds in hospitals.

It broke my heart to leave. Meghan had been studying me, my weakness, refusing it at once with her penetrating stare. All the faces I knew mingled in that face: the girl with long hair, then a high school teenager who painted, then a college student, so ahead of me, so free, living illegally, painting over on Bagley in rooms now gutted and redesigned as condos.

A man came in and said, “I’m Doctor Cahalin.” We all looked to him and were so dumbfounded we could hardly speak. Dr. Cahalin stood two inches shorter than me, with a body as round and perfect as an egg. His thinning red hair and upturned nosed made me smile. One didn’t see heavy doctors anymore, let alone cute ones. He wore black and red running shoes that were familiar to me. My husband, John, just bought the same Nikes, and looking at the box to see how much they cost, I noticed the name, Lunar Eclipse. They were so small, I wondered how he didn’t tip over. He scratched his head. His eyes held a sweetness that made you wonder how he got anywhere in this life. I had a sudden desire to adopt him.

“Ms. McCarthy? So, I talked to your doctor and everything’s set. You’ll get blood and go home.”

We all stared as if he were a deer that had suddenly poked his head into the hospital.

“Are you sure?” Meghan rasped.

Dr. Cahalin stood, befuddled in a way that was so sincere, so genuine, it felt shocking.

He crossed his arms over his prodigious abdomen rose up on the balls of his feet and said, “Well, I am the head doctor. I don’t make this stuff up.”

Meghan nodded. My father watched the ground. My shoulders dropped. In the room, with the beeping monitor and the IV dripping like time, I felt the release of a tension that had gripped my shoulders, the tendons and muscles there, then deep in the sockets. Only the release itself gave me the sense that I’d been holding them up, at some perpetual attention, long before the diagnosis, the blind faith, the “I hate to tell you this” and the “I am so sorry;” the mistakes of New York and the spoiled hopes of Kettering until it all came crashing down on one final phrase for the doctor she’d found four years ago: “She promised to fight with me.”

She said we were in this together.”

*She said she would fight it.* I heard her say it. I did, right in the hospital, she said it. I wanted to yell this, so many times.

The doctor now, with his Nikes, said, “Okay, nice to meet you.”

“Thank you,” I said.

We didn’t say anything until the doctor left, confused as he was. Our father smiled, “Hey, see?”

As the doctor walked down the hall, Meghan’s eyes followed him, just like Phoenix, the dog John and I had adopted, who tracked those he feared in case they turned around, because that is what people did. People were shape shifters. You couldn’t trust them. One minute they were nice, and petting you, and the next they were drinking from a bottle, and kicking you and hitting you with things until you were bloody. One minute they would fight for your life, the next there was nothing else they could do. In the past six months, Meghan went into the hospital twice, once for low potassium and once for a blood transfusion. They told her she’d be out by the end of the day. She ended up staying for a week.

“See? You’re okay.” I said.

Meghan turned her head slowly to our father. She stared at him long and hard.

“This’ll take hours,” Meghan said.

“Okay, I’m going.”

I found the Windstar, scraped by my father’s ill-considered reversals and crooked parking jobs. It sat in the back, under the pines. As I drove down Woodward, by the bookstore and the OM Macrobiotic Café, the winds of March howled in the wrong season. I drove on piebald tires through the yellow light and felt myself here, completely, without needing to plan for trips or phone calls.

The bad shocks sent me lifting and sinking to Ferndale, which was several miles away, but familiar. I could pull over and call John, but then I would cry, so I kept going. I saw the road. I wasn’t crazy or anything. But things flashed in my mind, so fully, in such a well-detailed way, they happened at the same time as this moment, like a quantum life playing beside me.

I drove down the road, descending through the miles, 12 Mile, then 11. But part of me went back in time, to when Meghan was first diagnosed. I scrubbed away all of my listening. I wiped away the phrases, “You’re strong” and “I am sure she’s a good doctor.” I even sponged away the later fights, when I urged her to stop eating meat, dairy and caffeine. I told her to drink green juices. She hung up on me, or said she would try. No, I washed away all of that now, and said one phrase. Now I had things I wished I’d said: *Look, the doctors are bullshitting you. Have you read the statistics? You have a one percent chance of making it to five years. Why don’t they tell you that? Try anything but that. For God’s sake, Meghan, run for your life.*

In my mind, as I drove to get my father a sandwich, I said all of this years ago, and it changed time. We were saved.

And then I was back in the car and everything was the same.

People passed in their Buicks and Escalades; their Suburbans and LandRovers. I saw an Econoline Van and wanted to put my sister and me on top of it, us sitting in La-Z-Boys, so



the wind could whip through our hair, and we could look out and see the road for miles ahead, take in the clean air and let people think we were crazy. What use did we have for propriety now? In this we were free.

I found a parking spot on 9 Mile, in front of a Cadillac and behind an Aspire. I fed two quarters into the meter. I walked into Al's with the yellow awning, where inside the old wood floors creaked and the green booths held writers, clicking away.

I passed the wooden benches and long counter with UAW t-shirts and saw a man behind the counter, presumably Al. I ordered a beet/carrot/apple/greens for me, the coffee, the cream, the sandwich. The man said, "You from around here?" Above him hung a picture of himself. At the side: another picture of his younger self.

"Yes," I said.

I was here. I didn't have to grade any more papers, and I didn't have to stop grading papers to answer every ring of the phone, just in case it was about Meghan. I didn't have to hang up on computerized messages, or tell telemarketers that I didn't want a better deal on my internet service/insurance/credit card/home loan. I didn't have to look out of the windows and see not the day, but the life ahead, the packing and the trips. I didn't have to feel the tight pain behind my left eye, seizing up.

Now, we were together. This much we had.

I got back into the car, drove north on Woodward, and sipped my juice. Once at the hospital, I thought we should call Johanson, Meghan's painter friend. He'd helped her get a picture in the president's office at Wayne State University. It was my favorite painting. I downed my juice. I walked toward the hospital and thought of my sister's painting, a little white image, almost a caricature of a girl, surrounded by a sea of churning red. The valets loped to cars. Someone waddled in like a penguin. I looked to the ground and saw the dull concrete, a puddle, and over there, on the dead lawn, a medical bracelet. I forced myself to lift my head. I breathed in fully and let it out in a huff.

The painting was entitled, "Girl in the Red Room."

A female security guard said, "Hold the food as you walk through."

She nodded as I passed employees laughing at a joke, the woman in a wheelchair, and another walking down the hall with an IV. The guard had pressed the button, and in a note of perfect timing, the doors separated just as I walked through. Yes, we would invite Johanson, I thought. Yes, no matter what, we would have the party. This was what Meghan wanted. This much we could do.

It was then that I heard Meghan yelling.

"I can't stay here overnight. I won't and I can't. I can't afford it."

I didn't know she could yell and it came out raspy and shredded, but sure, strong. When I got there, Meghan's eyes were full of terror and anger. She looked inhumanely treated, cornered.

A man stood in the room. He was a strange sight, since he didn't have scrubs. He wore business casual clothes, a striped shirt, Prada slacks, shiny shoes, with a V to his shoulders signifying a fellow who worked out. He had run mousse through his wet hair, so now it was stiff.

He stood back toward the tan and green curtains.

"What's happening?" I asked, foolishly clutching my paper bag, holding my paper cup of coffee.

"They say I have to stay."

“The doctor said you could go home.”

Our father looked cross and started shifting in his seat. “The last time they made her stay overnight she ended up staying for two weeks.”

He spit it out in a huff, as if anger had been building for months or years. “Shit,” he said, pointing his finger out in accusation, with a terrible, twisted expression rising up on his face.

Meghan shook her head.

The guy put his palm on me, as if I were the sane one.

“I’ll double check. I’ll see what’s going on.”

He shot out of there.

“Eat your sandwich,” Meghan said.

I gave dad the bag, and he pulled out the turkey and cheese, opened the wax paper and started eating angrily, tearing at it. It felt weird to see flesh eaten in an emergency room, but Meghan wanted him to eat, so he ate. Meghan stewed and simmered, almost growling.

Finally she said, “I won’t stay. They can’t make me.”

It dawned on me. *Of course not*. Of course you don’t *have* to stay. A hospital wasn’t a prison, was it? It couldn’t keep someone against her will. But she never argued the reasons for staying before. Could she have left then? I thought back. Meghan didn’t want to upset her doctor.

She had told me after a support group meeting, “If you get your doctor mad, they dump you. It happens all the time.”

I looked to Meghan, who held a face of long determination, of practiced resolve. And then I understood. That’s why she didn’t want the tests. Apart from the money, Meghan knew what the tests would say. Doctors told her it was too dangerous to travel for Christmas. Of course they did. They didn’t think she’d make it. They couldn’t be held responsible. But they’d come to an agreement. The doctor had told Meghan to get blood or go to a hospital at any sign of a problem. I imagined the doctor saying things. You are taking a huge risk. Why not stay? They can come to you.

“Meghan,” I said. But she didn’t respond. She didn’t have to.

She set her gaze on the curtains. She knew I knew. Meghan didn’t want us to worry, so she held it in. I leaned over and said, as quiet as a mouse: “In a couple of hours you’ll be home by the fire, even if we have to wheel you out of here in this bed.”

And it was settled, and I knew when I got home I’d have champagne, two glasses, and sit by the fire and be with my sister for Christmas.

The patient advocate slipped back in, eyes aghast.

“I’m so sorry. That was my mistake. We are not keeping you.”

It was bad when you tried to keep someone in the hospital out of good intentions, but it was worse when you learned the truth, and like a dummy you didn’t get it before, and then you realized what you’d done and had to come in and apologize. That was the worst for everyone, because it set it all in stone, and made a mockery of the thing you’d have to be a hopeless, naïve romantic not to understand. I’d drink three glasses of champagne when I got home. I’d sit by the fire. I’d close my eyes and think of nothing.

“Thank you,” I said. He put his open palm on me again, and I knew what that meant, but I just wanted him to go away.

“You can’t charge me for the tests,” Meghan yelled. And even though he was gone, she went on about the insurance, and how they were all trying to take her money, with all of these

tests, and hospital stays, and cab fares.

Dad bit a chunk off of his sandwich.

Meghan still talked about insurance.

“You’re going home today,” I said loudly, firmly, so Meghan would quiet down.

But Meghan kept going: “They just wanted to make their damned money and if they keep me here they’ll get more.”

“Oh, shut up, woman, for the love of God.”

Meghan glared. “You are so *rude*.”

“Join the club.”

Our father chewed. We watched the curtains flutter; the passing of feet.

“Where’s my phone?”

“Dad, where’s Meghan’s phone?”

“It’s plugged into the wall,” our father said, his mouth stuffed with turkey.

“Oh yeah,” I said. I’d forgotten. “I thought we should call Johanson.”

“He’s coming,” Meghan said. “What about Ellen and Aunt Joan?”

“We could call them now,” I said.

The nurses and assistants came in quietly now, as removed as janitors sweeping hallways.

One took the blood, the next checked the pulse. The third got the water. The fourth said, “It’s time to move you.”

All very proper; everyone business formal.

Meghan turned to me. “Dad should go home.”

I looked at Dad, slumped and sipping his coffee. “I’m fine.”

“Right,” I said. “Do you want us to call you?”

Meghan looked up. I couldn’t believe the blue of her eyes. They were duller in vitality, but still so rich and full in color, like the waters in the lake we knew as kids.

“I’ll call you,” she said.

I didn’t ask anything more. I didn’t need to; I didn’t want to.

Seven hours later, Meghan came home. We had to lift her up the steps, and set her back on the couch, on top of a deflated air mattress. When she had to get up, we inflated the mattress. That was all that mattered now. She had to be able to get up. We worked constantly. The bathroom, the bag, the Boost, the Vernors, the ice, the water, the fire. The gifts, the music, the hour. We soaked in every moment.

John arrived that day with the dog. Phoenix came up to sniff Meghan. He wagged his tail.

“Hi,” Meghan said with a smile. “Hi.”

John wrote the grocery list, drove to the store in our car, bought all of the groceries, cooked all of the meals, did all of the dishes, and stayed in the background they way a monk prepares mass. My mother and father held hands on the couch. The house was three-bedroom brick, solid as mortar.

On Christmas Eve, we all sat around the fire. Meghan’s energy rebounded. She ate food near a painting of herself, done by a former teacher. A sip of beer, a bite of ham, some cheese. I drank my champagne, a Veuve Clicquot John had bought that day. I felt no pain for several moments. I saw the fire and the tree, the Irish saints Meghan had bought as ornaments,

the little Irish hat. I memorized it all, took in every moment. I held John's hand. I petted the dog. Meghan went to bed early. Our mother and father sat close to one another on the couch. We were together. *We were together.*

On Christmas morning she threw up. It was the food. John and I gave one another gifts in our room, and downstairs we gave Meghan gift cards and a sweater. We walked the dog. We got the Vernors and the water, the Boost and the ice. We helped her up, and we helped her down. We sat around the tree. We did these things as though we were cartographers, measuring out the details precisely, out of deep regard for the shifting lands. The phone kept ringing. We gave directions. The whole day, I took mental pictures. Here is Meghan on the rocking chair. Here is Meghan getting gifts. Here she is, mad that Mom and Dad spent too much. Here she is on the couch.

The day after Christmas, Meghan sat in her rocking chair in front of the fire. When her friends arrived, they reached down to kiss and hug her.

John made pizza at Meghan's request. I walked in to help him. "Be with your sister," he said. He grabbed my hand furtively, as though pulling me to shore. The dog and I walked to the living room.

"He's a pretty dog," Johanson said.

"We should get another dog," Ellen added.

"Can you believe this weather?"

"How is your uncle Tim?"

"Meghan, how is New York?"

Meghan sat in her rocking chair, with three pillows under her, the fire framing her body. She wore a cherry-tinted sweater and the way it glowed against the fire intensified her pale skin, like the eye of a flame.

The smell of pizza overtook the room, and soon I got up to help John set four of them on the dining room table, along with stiff paper plates, silverware, and wine bottles. Meghan, who loved pizza, sat there, sipping water out of a straw.

She studied everyone. Ellen talked about their job as computer consultants. When Johanson downed his wine, Meghan pointed to his glass. I poured more for everyone, so she didn't have to wonder.

Meghan said, "Karen, do you have enough food?"

She sipped more water. When I saw Meghan then, I thought of things triumphant and misunderstood. I thought of Van Gogh and Theo. I'd wished one of us had written longer letters, private and probing, revealing a love and brilliance. When we read them, the words could have provided comfort in common hours. And maybe we had, I thought. Maybe in our way we slipped in one of those secret miracles in spite of them.

It was strange. Meghan looked like my sister, the one I'd always known. But there was another part of her that seemed aglow, on fire. While others ate, Meghan's eyes stared vaguely at the tree. And then, as if sensing her fatigue, the first guest, her old friend Ellen, got up to leave.

I didn't think about this. I'd never considered past this point. Of course they would leave. Of course the party would end.

I resisted the urge to whisper, "Don't go. Don't you move."

Ellen looked down at Meghan, and so did Johanson after her.

"We'll see you soon, Meghan," Johanson said. He gazed down at her with such love, such feeling.

“Yes,” she said, looking up like a baby. “See you soon.”

The night was coming, they said. Ellen had a long drive.

They expected heavy rains.

“How strange,” Johanson said, with his burly manner. “The day after Christmas.”

As I walked them to the door and made sure it shut behind them, I knew I’d try to convince Meghan to stay at my parents’ house. I’d tell her she shouldn’t go back, even if she hated me for it. Even if she yelled. If she would do that much, I would stay here as long as I could, until the day before I started teaching again, until the last possible second. Or longer. I’d take a leave, use the Family Leave Act. Let them fire me if they didn’t like it. What did jobs matter now? I could feel the heat of my urgency, like our dog in panic. I could feel the desperation and the futile resolve to stop the machines, to break all of the clocks and phones into bits. I stood, dumbfounded by them all. How could you leave now?

In Meghan’s face were many faces. The faces of innocence, fear; will. She smiled at everyone, but in that that smile came love and strain, appreciation and draining, panic and release.

I cleared the plates and when I walked into the kitchen John stopped me and put his arms around me. I wished for words triumphant, or at least palliative. I wished for wisdom that would make the Beaumont nurses weep.

“She’s not okay,” I whispered.

He took a deep breath, exhaled, and held me tighter, and whispered, “No, no she’s not.”

Then I knew. I would not ask her to stay after all. If I said these things, I’d be asking her to accept something that she refused long ago. If I tried this now, after everyone had left, she would be alone in the world, here, when she needed someone most. What did I know? Maybe that refusal, that resolve, kept her here this long.

My mind clipped on ahead, planning Meghan’s move from the chair to the bed. She would need to stop at the bathroom. We would retrieve the Vernors, water, ice, and phone. “I’m tired,” she said. And she got up on her own from the high seat, and shuffled with her walker to her small, constructed bed. I waited until she was in, then threw the covers across her.

I had to get to sleep. We would only have a few days left. I wanted to be there for every moment, every detail. “Thank you,” Meghan called after me.

I walked upstairs to the bedroom I’d known since I was a child. My mother and father slept, my sister watched television downstairs. I lay down with John, who kissed my hand and said, “You did it. You got your sister her Christmas.”

A knock thudded on the wall. I went downstairs and completed for her, one after the other, a string of tasks: a cup of ice, a cup of Vernors, a water, as if they were prayers on a rosary. I did them silently, without complaint. Then I found her phone, her computer, her charger, and her medicine.

A loud crack rang out. I ducked.

“What was that?” I said.

“Thunder,” she responded and pressed the remote buttons.

I pulled back the lace curtain and the vinyl shade, and looked outside just as the rain began to fall in torrents, wild sheaths of water until the Christmas lights across the road seemed to melt.

“Jeez,” Meghan said, and I looked over at her, sipping her drink out of a straw. “Good thing we’re home.”

Within seconds, the streets began to flood and a manger two doors down was pelted so hard I thought it would crack in two, or drift away. What powers the sky held. What incomprehensible might.

“Good thing,” I said, and with one more glance to the bolting sky, I let the curtain fall.

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Maureen Aitken’s work has been published in over 10 literary journals, and has won numerous grants and awards. Painting by Mary Ann Aitken, reprinted with permission from the Wayne State University collection.

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