

## Morning

By Olivia DeLeonardo

Every day I make the longish drive from our little apartment downtown to work. I drive the long grey strips of highway, listening to music, watching the buildings thin out and the green grass and trees grow thicker, and soon I can see the top of the hospital, which I have come to think of as “my hospital,” peeking up over the hills and swaths of green. It grows closer and larger, its shiny modern angles and surfaces winking in the sun. The unexpectedly avant-garde architecture, rooftop foliage and whimsical landscaping always make me smile, even though it is a hospital for sick children. I drive around the building, often joined by the cars of co-workers, all of us mentally preparing for the day and heading for the parking garage. The bright sunlight and shining glass surfaces make sunglasses necessary, and the contrast of the darkened, sparsely lit garage is always disorienting- driving in is like being swallowed. I usually take off my sunglasses, blink to allow my eyes to adjust, and fumble for the car lights in the sudden absence of light. As my eyes pull focus, I begin to notice the detritus of the previous night.

What is it about these objects that imbues them with such gravity? In any other context, I wouldn't give them a second glance- most of them are unquestionably just bits of trash, and yet here, they take on the quality of artifacts: an overturned paper cup, its plastic lid still attached with straw protruding; a balled up fast food bag; an indistinct puddle of something...and then the more personal objects- the abandoned sippy cup; a grey teddy bear with matted fur lying face down, or sometimes face up, looking quizzically at me. Once I park, get out of my car and begin my walk to the stairwell, my eyes light on smaller things- a pink plastic barrette with tiny molded flowers; a cigarette butt still wearing the lipstick of the smoker; sometimes a lone dirty sock or small sandal.

I cannot help but imagine the circumstances of these tragic, typically unremarkable bits of flotsam. Imagine the salty burger gobbled quickly, pickles dripping, faces swiped hurriedly with paper napkins; the car's tires squealing in reverse; the terrifying conversations shared over secret cigarettes. And then it is me in the shoes of the parents, siblings and friends who briefly touched these remnants and then left them behind in a scattered half walk-half run back to the hospital floor. I think of myself facing the fear and unknown of my child's sudden ailment or enduring the fatigue and emotional exhaustion of repeated trips to the hospital, my hospital, to treat my child's chronic illness. How quickly would I take up smoking again, and struggle to choke down food from a paper fast food bag.

I want pick up all of these forlorn leftovers, gather them up and hold them tightly to my chest, preserve them, label them, record their provenance for future generations, encase

them in glass in a hushed room with high ceilings and uniformed security guards. I do not let go of them; I take them with me as I pass through the smoothly sliding glass doors into the cool tranquility of the lobby, making my way deeper into the hospital to start a new day.

When I return to my car in the afternoon, they will all have disappeared- swept up and discarded, or perhaps magically ascended to a special exhibit in the clouds. Either way, I still hold on to these objects, hoping that if at least one person remembers them, they cannot be completely erased. Maybe at least the lost teddy will find his way back to his best friend, the sandal will return to the tiny bare foot, and the barrette will once again hold back the curls of a giggling little girl returning home, happy and well, smiling in the sunshine.

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