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Untidy Lipstick

By Irena Tan

Back in the glory days of our childhood, my sister and I used to spend hours in front of the master bedroom mirror trying on our mother's clothing. With fumbling fingers, we'd painstakingly wind our brown hair in pink plastic curlers, patting blush on each other's cheeks, and tracing her dark red lipstick as carefully as our hands would allow on our lips. We strutted around in her high heels trying not to trip, proud as brightly-painted peacocks, the folds of her woolen skirts pooled around our ankles, yearning for the time we would become real grown-ups with real adult clothes and real important things to do. At the time, it seemed that there was nothing more urgent than hurrying up and growing older. It's funny how the world circles and circles until you end up right back where you started.

My sister and I were thick as thieves growing up. She was older by three years and some change, but she was never-failing, like the sun and the moon of my younger years, and I couldn't envision a day in my life without seeing her. Of course, then she grew up and then I grew up, and then there were the boys who came and went, and then the boys who came and stayed, and no longer did we move together as one body or laugh together as one voice.

Eventually, even our promised daily phone calls dwindled. The miles that stretched between us after she moved beyond the mountains lengthened into more than distance, into weeks and sometimes even months during which I didn't hear my sister's voice. But I had found myself in my work, in the big-hearted and small-hearted ways of the children in my classroom, and I found that my days and heart were full enough.

Years passed.

Her sons grew up and left, as we had once done before.

I continued the same way I had for those intervening years, and if occasionally the echoes rang loud and empty in my one-bedroom house, I joked that my life was constantly being replenished with children, and that I had no need for more children than the hundreds I had already raised in my classroom. But somehow, I think, she knew that loneliness had crept into my life, perhaps because it was newly a part of hers, and my phone, which had grown dusty with waiting, became again the most demanding member of my household.

"That cough sounds bad, Mary. Have you gone to see someone about it, get some cough medication?" No, I told her, not yet.

They found cancer inside my lungs. By the time it was discovered, it had already spread to both my lungs, a horrible, hungering life growing inside my body. Disbelief, tears, and beneath it all,

a terror that ran deep, so deep I couldn't see the end of it. Then the clinic visits that replaced my beach days, the countless scans in various machines that whirred and clicked until I was sure that the doctors had peeled me down to the tissue, to the bone, to the wisp of soul floating within me.

But against all odds, the treatments slowed the cancer, halted it, and then beat it back until it retreated into the recesses of its first strongholds. The clinic visits continued, but the beach days came back, and the stranglehold of fear that had held me captive began to loosen.

It was a girls' only beach day: me, my sister, and my mother. We had painted our toenails in anticipation of feeling the warm sand under bare feet, ruby red spots of color glinting under the unblinking stare of the sun. We relaxed into a silence, our books forgotten in our laps, and the world enveloped us – the seagulls' cries, the wind nudging at the sleeves of our cover-ups, the sun casting itself at the sea and creating a blaze of light on the horizon.

I am walking, absently, aimlessly, upon the sand when I feel a tickle, an itch in the tip of my right pinky, a sensation so harmless and so ordinary it tumbled from my mind as soon as it was felt. So when my leg collapses beneath me, and my arm begins to rise and fall, entirely unbidden, like an unsteady seesaw, I, who had been so vigilant with every twinge and every ache, am taken entirely by surprise. My sister, suddenly, is here, kneeling at my side, and then a crowd of strangers, and I hear them calling out for help, water, the lifeguard, hands trying to turn me on my side, and for just a second, a tide of hot embarrassment claws free and rises above the maelstrom of emotions, before I meet my sister's eyes and our fear drowns me on the sand. Above the clamor of voices, the bluster of the ocean, I hear the distant wail of sirens.

Minutes pass, then hours, then days, and still my limbs beat a metronome against the air.

I can tell the doctors forget I'm there sometimes. Impossible, you might think, when I'm lying there in the center of the room, my arms and legs grotesquely writhing, and the constant soft smack, smack, smack of my limbs against the sides of my padded bed. But this thing that has taken hold of me is a vacuum, a vortex, and I am invisible, hollowed out by this storm.

I can't even speak, my body having stolen my voice, and because I am mute, it is like I am deaf. The doctors, nurses, therapists file in and out and they talk to my sister, who hasn't left my side. When I open my eyes she is there, and when I close my eyes, I feel her arm upon my arm, her side pressed upon my side, trying to hold me down, grant me a reprieve from motion. But I listen, and I hear.

"Your sister has a very rare condition. It is a movement disorder, one in which the brain fails to stop the arms or the legs from moving. Think of the brain as a traffic conductor - it allows signals through in an orderly manner, allowing you to do something like scratch your nose, which we can do without thinking, but is an incredibly complex maneuver if you imagine the number of muscles that need to be controlled to do it. But in your sister, her traffic conductor has its signals stuck on green, and so all her arms and legs see are 'go, go, go.' We call this chorea."

A pause. "I just want...I need to know. Is it the cancer?"

"We're not sure, but it is possible that her cancer, or even the treatment she got for her cancer, may have been the trigger, yes."

Each morning we wake up and we take stock. Am I moving less today than yesterday? I play a secret game: how long can I hold my breath until my arm or my leg jars my lungs into breathing again? The breathlessness feels like a triumph, each gulp of air bitter like a loss. I take one medication, then another, and another. Day after day, new concoctions are poured into my blood, until in a baffling about-face, they siphon my blood in order to cleanse it. But there is no longer a point to playing, for my body has forgotten stillness.

Their voices come in and out of focus.

"...work on making your sister comfortable..."

A glimpse of my sister's face, weary. A doctor's eyes, flickering over me, then averted.

"...recommend starting her on a pain drip, a medication that goes into her IV, and it will treat her pain..."

"...help her rest..."

I sink into remembering. One day, when my arms felt like they might belong to me again, my sister came in, smiling. A little surprise, she said, to celebrate you getting better. She hands me a department store bag, and a wealth of riches spills out in front of me: sleekly bottled mascara, a glittering palette of eyeshadow, outrageously orange nail polish, followed by tube after tube of lipstick in hues I had never been brave enough to try. I blink my eyes at her extravagance, and she laughs a little, saying, thought you deserved something a little special. We spend the morning adorning my face. Although the uneven lines of my lipstick are a far cry from the graceful curves I had once been able to draw unthinking, we are as proud of the untidy result on my face as we had ever been of the grown-up caricatures we once created in our mother's closet. The bed, surrounded by stubby gray polyester walls, my cage within a cage, I can pretend is actually a fort of our construction. It is a golden morning, my sister's hand gently guiding mine, our laughter mingling in the air, and I am in love with all the world.

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