

This Weeping of the Skin

by
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You are inexplicably disappointed when you find out that your cousin Corinne is getting married. Though you haven't seen her in years, you've heard from your mother that Corrine has overcome her bad habits and become a paralegal. With each new discovery about her life, your respect for your cousin noticeably wanes. Your perversity disgusts your mother, who thinks you should have outgrown such twisted logic. You think fondly back on the days when your mother saw Corrine as someone from whom you should be protected.

You tell your mother that you are enraged that Corrine and this Robert person have spent a year of their combined income on the wedding. Still, you agree to go to the wedding with her, and you tell yourself and her that you are going just to see what \$70,000 of fluff looks like. You would never tell anyone, not even yourself, that you think Corinne should have asked you to be a bridesmaid. What female could she have ever been so close to? The two of you shared blood. What could others be to her?

“Did they rent the whole Goddamned botanical garden?” A plastic banner is stretched across the entrance to the park. There are small slashes cut in the material so the wind can move through it instead of fight against it, threatening to tear it down. Across the banner, silver letters spell out:

WELCOME TO CORINNE AND ROBERT'S WEDDING!

in a way that makes you think of Disney mice blowing tiny trumpets. You are in your mother's car and she is searching for a parking space. The slit in the core of your being has begun to open and acid has begun to seep out into what you vaguely imagine is slick flesh, pink and shiny, your skin turned inside out.

“I don't think we'll be able to park. I think we should go home.” You know there's no way you can do it; you tell your mother there's no way you can witness such a

debacle, such a farce. You've begun to sweat, and your skin is cool under the rivulets running down your sides. You hold the palms of your hands up to the vent in the dashboard to dry them, at least momentarily. You taste the metal that makes you think you might throw up. Your mother pulls into a parking spot.

"I'm going to wait here," you say quietly.

Your mother observes you with barely concealed agitation. "What do you mean, Gillian?" she asks, although it's perfectly obvious what you mean.

At the reception, Corinne accosts you, arms wide open, as if expecting you to be happy for her, as if you are reunited sorority sisters. "Doesn't she know me at all?" you wonder, as you are swept into Corinne's perfumed, tulle embrace. Awkwardly, you pat your cousin's sequin studded back.

"I'm so glad you came!" Corinne's voice is shrill. Her gown is sleeveless, and her arms, like yours, bear evidence of your shared teenage indiscretions. It makes you smile. You grab Corinne's wrist between your right thumb and index finger and pull her arm up between you. Her arm feels hollow like you think the bones of birds are. You think your own bones are heavy and dense. Like concrete. You can feel the stringy tendons beneath her skin, feel the beat of her heart in her wrist. You study the scar tissue intently, run the fingers of your left hand over the flesh, darker where it had been cut and healed, raised in the spots where a cut had been especially deep.

Corinne nervously yanks her wrist away. She holds a lacy handkerchief, which she uses to dab at your sweaty handprint left on her pale skin. "Are you enjoying the party?" she asks.

In response, you push up your sleeve and thrust your own forearm before her. She flinches and you giggle. "Look!" your voice sounds manic, almost dangerous even to you, and nearby people turn to see you, to see if you're crazy or just drunk. "It's the only thing we still have in common!" you tell your cousin; you grin broadly to put her at ease. Corinne begins to back away from you.

"I'm glad you could make it, let's keep in touch," Corinne says in parting, as she turns away.

You call after her, “Congratulations! You look like a giant meringue!”

When your mother was pregnant with you, her sister had just had her own baby. The pregnancy was *a dream*, she told her sister, and the labor was easy. *A snap* she said, and she snapped her fingers in front of her big sister’s face. Little Corinne was perfect in every way, so you would be, too. It was simple genetics.

But it was different for you and your mother. It was thought, before you were born, that you had not been a viable fetus. She told you the story often when you were a child, usually to comfort you when you cried, inexplicably, for days on end. “You are a miracle,” your mother would say. “You were meant to be here with me.” Sometimes you wondered if she was trying to convince herself that your life was justified, that it wasn’t a mistake to pin all her reproductive hopes on you, a girl who had struggled against her and against life itself since conception.

She had been sick every day that you were within her. The more you grew, the sicker she became, until she was bedridden and studded with tubes that linked the two of you to life. Early on, the doctors had advised aborting; *they were obliged to inform her* that carrying this baby to term would likely mean she could never conceive again. They had been right. In a prenatal rage, you had torn your mother’s womb from its moorings, ensuring no siblings would be borne. Though you never told anyone, you remember it, remember floating suspended in darkness and filled with anxiety, knowing even as a seed that it was all wrong, that you weren’t supposed to be here. Your little unformed extremities had yanked and struggled and fought to bring your mother’s insides down around yourself. You were born, you recall with pride, with the umbilical cord wrapped tightly around your neck. Too tiny and too blue to survive, you could have gone quietly, but the doctors forced life upon you with brutality.

As it had been within, it was without - from the beginning, there were all sorts of things wrong with you. You were sick all the time with ear infections and lung problems. And you sweat, constantly, always have, still do, especially your hands and your feet, so that you would lie in your crib, your little baby mattress soaked, a wet aura surrounding

your little baby body. It's called hyperhydrosis, this constant weeping of the skin, but people don't know that and they think it's disgusting. When you are very small other children don't want to play with you because they say you are *Juicy*, that's what one of them said one day and it stuck. You play by yourself or with the teacher. You grow to prefer being alone. You dread situations where you have to meet people, might have to shake hands or get change or touch people in any way. Writing is very difficult because it requires towels and lots of maneuvering; the paper quickly becomes so wet that it tears, the letters bleed into one another as if they too are weeping. When you're in second grade, the kids start calling you *Handicapped*. You can't decide if that's better or worse than *Juicy*.

In elementary school, the pits beneath your arms sweat so badly that by lunch time every day you have sweaty stalactite streaks to your waist, to your wrists. In third grade you start bringing another shirt to change into every afternoon. You start to wear dark clothes, large clothes, and this also helps to hide your new breasts, suddenly outlandishly large. The other children confront you and tease you daily about their presence, and soon you discover that someone at school has been saying it means you had sex, and you're sure you didn't even though you aren't sure what that means. You are eight, you are nine years old, and sometimes strange men make comments about your body, about your *tits*, they say, and the word makes you sick, the sound of it a hissing slap that stings again when you try to think of yourself as a child, when you try to imagine that you're Laura Ingalls Wilder, that Mary Poppins is your nanny, that Santa Claus is real.

When you are in the eighth grade, you re-meet Corinne. *For the first time as adults*, you think. You are in different schools, she in private, you in public, and your mothers aren't close, so you haven't known each other well as children. But now you're thirteen and she's fourteen, and you're at her house for the first time in years, for a Christmas visit, with a present, and your aunt is knocking on your cousin's bedroom door. "KEEP OUT!" it says, painted in black letters above a poorly executed skull and cross bones. You can't believe her mother let her paint on the door.

“WHAT?” The girl who opens the door is unfamiliar to you. She is wearing a camouflage print mini-skirt and tartan print tights. Her tiny, boyish body is lost in a giant black turtleneck with sleeves that her black nailed fingertips barely extrude from. Her black Doc Martin boots are shiny and new. You try not to stare, but in her face, beneath the thick bangs that hang in her eyes, beyond the black ringed eyes and garish red lips, you see an echo of your own face. She takes your breath away. She makes her mother nervous.

“Well, my goodness!” your aunt puts on a little show, acting surprised at her daughter’s rudeness, as if she is usually the very picture of etiquette, all dainty and polite. “Corinne, where are your manners? Your cousin Gillian is here. For Christmas. She has something for you.” For the first time, Corinne takes notice of you. You are wearing jeans and tennis shoes. And a red sweater. With a green Christmas tree. Your concession to your mother’s desperation, her pleas for you to enjoy the holidays. You feel like an idiot.

Corinne rolls her eyes. “Come in.” Your heart trills as you step over the threshold. “Not YOU!” You freeze, your heart jams and trips but then you realize she’s not talking to you. You turn around and see that your cousin has barred the door to her mother. You are glad your own mother is in the living room and doesn’t see this. Your aunt laughs. “Well, okay... you girls...” Corinne slams the door, and you hear through it you aunt’s muffled last words, “...have fun!”

You don’t know where to look first. Her walls are covered with posters, mostly of bands you’ve never heard of. A bald and naked mannequin stands in the corner, her arms and shoulders draped with black clothes and black leather belts studded with shiny silver spikes. You hear your cousin groan behind you, and stomp over to her bed. “Is her sister that lame?” She asks you, and for a second you are confused, because you’re looking at a poster of a wild-eyed woman. The letters beneath her picture say, “Siouxie and the Banshees.” But then you realize that she’s talking about your mothers. “Yeah, I guess,” you mumble. You stand, awkwardly. There’s no obvious place to sit. Corrine is reclining on her bed, leaning on one elbow, watching you in a not unfriendly way.

“Hey,” she says, and points with her chin to a red bean bag beneath a pile of black clothes. “Just throw that shit on the floor. Sit there.” Before you do as you’re told you put the little silver gift bag down on the floor. You are careful to put it down open, with the little rope handles hanging down on either side. You are hoping she won’t notice that they’re wet from being clenched in your fist.

Just as you begin to settle into the chair, Corinne points to the little bag on the floor between you. “What’s that?”

“Oh!” You act like you forgot it was there. You lean out of the chair, onto your knees. You grab the little bag and hand it up to her. “It’s for you.” You feel the blood in your face as you see a single bead of your sweat roll down the shiny surface of the bag. “It’s no big deal. Really.”

Corinne takes the bag and sits up on the edge of the bed. Her shiny boots are in front of you. You wonder if your mother would ever buy you those boots. “The bag’s kind of wet,” she says, and wrinkles up her nose.

“Yea, I, uh, I just washed my hands, and there’s no towel...” you say but it doesn’t matter, because she’s pulled the gift out, and she is pleased. “Awesome! The Cure...this is like the coolest, Gillian...Dude, you don’t understand, I love Robert Smith. I mean like seriously. I’m in love with the man, okay?” You’re not exactly sure who Robert Smith is. You guess he’s the main guy in The Cure. You only know a couple of the songs. You are so grateful that you didn’t choose Madonna’s Greatest Hits that you think you might cry. To think, you had held both cassettes in your sweaty hand, and almost by accident, you had chosen right.

A few months later it’s spring and you’ve seen Corinne four times since Christmas. But not since you’ve had a birthday. You’ll be the same age for 4 and 1/2 months. You know the difference in your ages to the minute, but you don’t tell her that. You’re not thinking of her now, you’re not really thinking of anything, it’s just after school one day and the tears begin on your walk home. Nothing particular has happened, just another horridly monotonous day, locked in a windowless crypt under florescent lights with absurd children you would give anything to be like. At least you would’ve

before you met her. But right now you're wet and you're sick of it, your shoes are wet and moldy, there are wet handprints on your jeans. If only you could have dry skin, maybe everything else would work out, maybe you could bear another day under the incandescent Texas sun, in the treeless monotonous suburbs, all dust and dirt and heat mirages and misery.

The familiar feeling that tells you the darkness is coming has started, the physical warning that you first noticed when you were little, maybe four years old. It begins just beneath and behind your heart, a little vacuous pocket amidst the thudding hot activity in your chest. You wonder if anyone else ever had such a feeling, if anyone else suffers the little pocket of sadness that brims over from time to time and spills its poison into the bloodstream. You visualize it, every time it happens, and you observe it in your mind's eye with strangely detached fascination, heart pumping over-hard and fast, body and mind bracing for the rush of toxicity to come. The little vacuum pocket begins to dilate, and within moments it pushes everything else aside, pressing organs and muscles to the perimeter of your thorax. Once it starts, it's impossible to know when it will stop, how long you'll be caught in the undertow.

Your senses heightened, the scratching sound of your key in the lock brings a metallic taste to your tongue. Once inside, though the house is empty you run to your bedroom as if pursued, dropping everything that you carry along the length of the corridor as if the thing stalking you was behind rather than within. You sink finally onto the cold tile floor of the bathroom, your eyes drawn at once to the dirt in the corners, clinging to the angle between the floor and the baseboard in a hairy, gritty dark pile. It enrages you, everything is so hateful and dirty, how can you live like this? How could anyone live like this? And yet you know you have it so well compared to most people in the world, and you know how hard your mother works, and you are ashamed of your selfish self. You throw yourself hard up onto your knees, and the painful crack as they hit the floor adds to your ire, underscoring your very existence. You crawl, face red and sticky with tears and mucous, to the corner and dig your fingernails into the dirt so hard that they, soggy and weak from sweat, break in jagged, splintered lines. It's an oddly satisfying sensation, how your fingertips reverberate from the impact, and you think

fleetingly of something you learned in biology, *bone conduction*, and how you loved the sound of that, of bones carrying vibrations through your body, how even deaf people can sort of hear that way, and then there is furor, absolute furor at the part of you that is not participating in this pain, the part of you that is thinking about goddamned bone conduction. Your sweat has mixed with the dirt in the corner and made a paste that coats your fingertips and lodges beneath what's left of your fingernails. You bite off the soggy, ragged ends of the broken nails and one pierces your tongue, and the gritty dirt smears the inside of mouth. You are dizzy with rage.

Through your tears, the blurry perkiness of the pink-handled razor on the edge of the tub disgusts you; from a still place at your center you observe as the embossed flowers on the handle impress your fingertips insidiously. You dig the dull safety blade into the white skin of your forearm; you have vague thoughts of suicide, of course, have always held it like a smooth stone in your mind, your way out; you early crossed that line, you thought about it first when you were nine, and once you've really thought about, once that's really been an option for you, it's always an option, it's always that choice D, none of the above. But you've never actually tried it and you think this would be a start, a practice run – you would hack away at the skin, in the vicinity of your wrists. You imagine an ambulance coming and then your wrists bandaged and then later scars that make people whisper. But it's soon evident that you could saw away at yourself for hours with this thing and do no real harm. The cut feels just like a tickle at first, just edgy and smooth, and then the invigorating sensation of split skin overwhelms everything else, absolutely everything else. It doesn't hurt for a few seconds, you find, not until you move the razor away and the tiny thin line of blood, not even enough to drip, rises to the skin. Never have you felt such focus, such clarity. You make half a dozen little cuts that day, most timid, barely more than bad scratches, but a couple of nice deep ones that drip a little, tiny new mouths whispering your material pain. They hurt for the rest of the day, even into the next, an oddly pleasant buzz of pain that seems to make everything a little brighter, a little sharper. As you go through your day the sweat from the palms of your hands and beneath your arms mingles and seeps its salty way back into you, through the passages that you yourself made. The sting reminds you that you have a secret, a crazy,

dangerous secret that would shock those idiots at school. You have the marks of a warrior.

That weekend you see Corinne. The first half hour you're alone she doesn't notice your arms, though you push the long black cotton sleeves that hide them from your mother up over your elbows when you've secluded yourselves in Corinne's room. You sit on the floor together as she drones, in an affected tone, on about *thoseassholejocks*. As she rarely requires a response, you think about the pink carpet you both sit on. You know that she chose it when she was 8. You saw it once back then, when their house was new and you and your mother came over for a housewarming party. She had shown you her room that day, six long years ago, and you both agreed it was the prettiest and best carpet in the world. It is anathema to the girl she is now. She claims that its rosy color makes her feel sick, and tells her parents that if they loved her they would buy her new carpet, or just rip the shit out. She covers as much of it as she can with black objects and clothes that you must push aside to find a space to sit. You like that about her, and because you are 14 you think that is very sophisticated.

Corinne has never questioned your dark and oversized wardrobe; although she does not sweat and has the lean, muscular body of a natural athlete, she always dresses in black. It is not something you discuss, except to express your shared disdain for color. She confides in you that she sometimes has an urge to kick or slap people dressed in pastel colors. You find that shocking but understandable, and you've never felt closer to anyone.

When at last she notices the horizontal slashes and scabs on your arm, Corinne is curiously thrilled. "Oh. My. God," she says each word emphatically, with even more emphatic spaces between them. You start to panic – does she think you're disgusting? But instead she grabs your right wrist with her left hand and gestures to both your forearms, to hers and to yours, in one sweeping motion. Her pale skin bears scratches and cuts that mirror your own, though more advanced and precise. You know at that instant, with more certainty than you've ever known anything, that you will always be best friends.

You spend the night in her room that night, on the floor in your sleeping bag. You talk for hours before you fall asleep. As sleep is starting to swallow you, Corinne calls your name from above you, in her bed.

“Yea, I’m awake, Rin, What’s up?” you have started calling her Rin and she likes it, she says nobody’s called her a nickname before. You told her that sometimes people call you Gill. She laughed and said she’d call you *Lian*.

But now she calls you Gillian, and her lack of familiarity brings in you a sense of dread.

“Gillian, can I ask you something?”

“Yea, Corinne,” you want to make sure she gets the point, so you say it again, “you can ask me anything you want, Corinne.”

“Lian,” she begins, and tears come to your eyes, unexpectedly. You are so glad it’s dark. “What’s the deal with your hands? How they always sweat?”

You stammer a little, you say, “Well, it’s a sort of disease thing,” and you think you’ll be able to get the words out, but your voice breaks and the tears come.

“Oh Lian, oh, I’m so sorry,” and the creaking bed and the shape shifting vaguely in the dark tells you Corinne is getting out of her bed and crawling onto the floor. She lies down next to you, outside of your sleeping bag, and puts her arm around your shoulder, hugging and rocking you as if you were a little child. She strokes your hair as you cry and whispers to you, “it’s okay, Lian, everything’s fine, it’s cool, it’s no big deal...” She smells clean, like soap.

After you have stopped crying and you are calm, she stays on the floor beside you. She holds your sweaty hands in hers, and when you try to pull them away she stubbornly holds them tightly.

“It’s called hyperhidrosis. I was born with it. “ Because she is so close to you, your voice is a whisper. “It’s not contagious, or anything,” you tell her. She props herself up on her elbow. You look up into her face and you see the whites of her eyes flashing, wild. She is dangerous when she says, “I wouldn’t care if it was; Lian. I swear to God. I would do anything for you. Seriously. I’d die for you. *We’re family.*”

You are so thrilled that you can't sleep, but you are silent and still and soon she goes back to bed. She never asks you about it again.

For most of the next three years you wear clothes that cover your skin from chin to ankle, a self-imposed burka of decadence and shameful pride, your secret habit swelling until at times it becomes difficult to find fresh skin to cut. Conversely, Corinne doesn't seem particularly concerned as to whether people see her cuts or not. This, too, wins your admiration, and you think she is brave because you cannot stand the stares and the concerned looks at which she flippantly scoffs.

You and Corinne search each other's bodies for good cuts, but never cut each other, because to do that would mean unhitching your self-control from the resulting exquisite pain. It goes without saying; you don't even have to discuss it. It would defeat the whole purpose.

* * *

By the time you both graduate from high school, your relationship has become distant, and forced at best. She has a lot of friends, and it's difficult for you to be around them. It hurts you when she becomes close to someone else, especially a girl. A few times, Corinne tried to fix you up with one of the cool guys she hangs out with. You ended up making out with a couple of them, but both times you burst into tears and ran from the room, demanding that Corinne take you home. Eventually she stopped calling so much, so you stopped calling back.

Now you are eighteen and your depression has grown so overwhelming that you are finishing coursework at home. The kids at your school, those who notice, assume you are pregnant. The cutting has dwindled for both you and Corinne. She has a nose ring and a boyfriend who is a drummer. You are prone to unsettling bursts of emotion, and you are so embarrassed by the profuseness of your sweat, the size of your breasts, that it makes you nervous, and you fold into yourself, your shame outweighs your desperation for a boy's, any boy's, attention.

As she turned outward and you inward, the relationship between you and Corinne became less important. You've lost touch, but you know from your mother that she's been institutionalized at least twice – once for bulimia and once for heroin addiction. Both times stir something in you resembling admiration at her heroic displays of physical self-destruction, so public and grand, so incredibly life threatening – your own self-hatred seems niggling and small in comparison.

You have stayed at home, and finally graduated from college with a degree in English Literature, after 6 years of stops and starts. You dreaded graduation, not because you loved or even liked school but because it seemed a good way to postpone life. The person that you have always imagined you would be now, as an adult, is not you; she would not even like you if she met you. The discrepancy adds another layer to your self-disdain. You are held suspended as if in aspic.

Sometimes you take anti-depressants. You don't like taking them, you say they don't work, but really you feel like taking them is cheating. At one point your mother comes to you and says with absolute sincerity, "You know, Baby, Corinne takes antidepressants and they've worked really well for her..."

You say, "Good. Good for her," cutting your mother off mid-sentence.

She tries again. "Sweetheart, I was just going to tell you that I talked to her about it...about your problem..." you can't believe what you're hearing and now she's actually saying that Corinne said she'd *be happy* to talk to you, to help you and give you advice because *she wants you to get better. After all, you're family.*" You simply cannot speak to her, so great is your outrage, for the rest of the day. The next day you tell her that you *are not Goddamn Corinne and Goddamn Corinne doesn't need to know your Goddamn business.* Then you both are crying and apologizing, and you are thinking, *what's going to become of me?*

Though you don't speak about it, you and your mother both know that if she were to die suddenly, you would be lost. You have told her you think you would try to be institutionalized if anything happened to her. She is terrified for you; there is no one to whom she can entrust you, no one who could understand the invisible pools of pain in

which you'd floated since birth, even before. She takes you to the Social Security office, where you apply for disability benefits due to your mental state. "*I'm touched in the head,*" you like to say with a hick accent. It makes your mother uncomfortable, and she says "Gillian, please don't say that." But you laugh and you say it again.

Now, at Corinne's bedside in the maternity ward, you stand slightly behind your mother. You haven't seen your cousin since her wedding reception two years ago. The thought crosses your mind that today you will give Corinne one more chance to redeem herself. Her newborn baby is in a bassinet at the foot of the bed, and you're observing him with interest, trying to think if you've ever seen a newborn baby up this close. His blue veins show through his thin, furry skin. "What do you call him?" you ask.

"Robert James," Corinne sighs dreamily, and you snort.

"Like after Robert Smith?"

Your mother laughs, as if you've made a joke. "She's just kidding," she says to Corinne.

"No, after his father." Corinne's words are clipped.

"Robert Smith's father?" You can't stop yourself, and you're not sure why.

"My husband, Corinne, my husband's name is Robert." You are all quiet for a few seconds and then she laughs, and your mother laughs. It's all a big joke.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Corinne asks. Her tone tells you she is indulging you, that she has decided to forgive you. *Because you are a little crazy.*

"I guess so. I was just thinking that I feel sorry for him," you answer. Your mother's nervous laughter spurts forth in twitters.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" the ire in Corinne's voice is familiar, and you feel oddly close to her for a moment, feel the way about her that you did when you were together years ago, slicing your arms and legs, listening to the Smiths, to the Cure, to Depeche Mode, not knowing yet that you were a cliché.

"It's just that life is so horrible and hard. He didn't have a choice, he was somewhere nice, I bet, and you yanked him out of there and made him come here where

it's awful." You stare intently at the baby's closed eyes. "Poor little guy. You'll know so much sadness and pain. Then one day you'll die."

"Gillian," Corinne begins, her voice controlled and deliberate, "why did you come here today?"

You don't know how to respond. You really don't know why you came and you tell her so, you say, "God, Corinne, I don't know." You try to think why. "Maybe curiosity, I guess?" You think that her silence is an encouragement to keep talking. "Corinne, do you remember when we were teenagers, and we both swore we'd never have kids because life is so hateful and ugly? Remember? We were conscientious objectors, we said, to human life. We agreed that only the most idiotic or most evil person would bring an innocent little baby into this hell. Remember?"

"Gillian, please stop," your mother whispers.

"Gillian, I do remember that," Corinne's voice, in contrast, is steady and strong. "That was a long time ago, and we were confused little girls. I don't feel like that anymore. I've grown up. It's been really, really hard; you know what it's like, having your whole world built around darkness. I've changed. I'm happy now. I'm so sorry that you're not, but please don't blame me for being happy. And please don't say such negative things to me and the baby."

You reply before you can stop yourself. You tell yourself you won't reply, but hear the words coming from your own mouth, "I'm sorry Corinne," you're kind of stammering and you say, "I guess I don't think people should have children. I mean, I'm not ever gonna have children..."

And she snaps back, quick and cracking like a whip, "And we're all grateful for that, Gillian, believe me..."

You wish as you often do that your pain was physical. How could she be so distant, how could she act like the girls that you were when you loved each other were some other people? That might not have been *her* but that *was you* and still is. Bitch. You curse yourself. And her. As you leave the room you hear your mother apologizing to Corinne for your behavior. You wish you would turn around and say something dramatic, you wish you would say,

“What you don’t understand, Cousin, is that I’m the one who stayed true, that what you did was sell out, not get well. You gave in to them all and they filled you so full of chemicals, it’s no wonder you think you’re happy. All you ever wanted was a veil, you wanted a caul to spread its membrane around you. You used to seek it from the men on the streets, the ones who looked you up and down, at first suspicious but then later knew you well and called you ‘little sister’, ‘miss ivory’, and at least that was honest. Now you seek it from men in white coats who barely look up from clipboards, men who shake your hand limply and then wash their own small, soft hands. It’s just exactly the same. But you don’t see it that way.”

But of course you don’t say that and instead you string the silent words like bony beads on a cord of braided nerves. You lurch along the hall, quickly lost in the glossy-floored maze. The still part of you notices the sterile but terrifying hospital smell; the smell of inevitability. It echoes to you formaldehyde, sparks in your mind a single image from your childhood, a starfish floating in a jar. You imagine that people who see you think that someone you love must have died.

Your rage drives you out through doors somewhere in the cardiac wing. You are disoriented when the sun hits your face, you have no idea where your mother’s car is, so you decide that for the first time in your suburban life you’ll ride the bus. You imagine your mother’s panic when she comes out of the hospital; you are missing, and while she searches for you she’ll realize how wrong she was, how she betrayed you by taking Corrine’s side instead of yours.

When at last you locate the bus stop, you can’t read the posted bus schedule through your tears. You slam yourself down on the narrow metal bench, one of those that folds up if no one’s sitting on it, so that people can’t get comfortable, can’t get rest if they need it.

You’re a stupid, pathetic, selfish bitch, Gillian, you know you are, you know every body would be better off without you. You do know that, don’t you? Of course you know that. You put your head in your hands and your face is all wetness, all tears and sweat. You’re furious with yourself for not having the courage to do what needs to be done, for not being strong enough to make the simple leap from the bench, out in front of the cars

of all the people happily singing with the radio and talking on cell phones, having babies and doing whatever else it is that people do, living their lives in a different world than yours. *But you can't imagine anyway to get there from here, can you, you stupid, useless little girl?* So you sit and you wait, wondering how long it will take for your mother to find you, waving on bus after bus that stops and opens its doors to you.