

Maman Joon

Before I left the house, Ameneh swiveled in her seat and snapped at me: “Maman joon, khar hasti.” *Mother dear, you’re an idiot.* I didn’t say anything and instead left, strangely comforted by my daughter’s use of the adjective “dear.” Somehow it diluted the acidity of “idiot.”

The afternoon sun in Yazd is so hot that I often feel the overwhelming urge to vomit. Of course, I do not. But I still envision it every time I catch a shimmering glimpse of the dimpled blacktop.

As usual, the hospital parking lot gushes with cars. I manage to squeeze through without tearing my manteau on a broken headlight, like I did last time. I had no other choice but to endure the rest of the day with pins poking my left thigh. I returned home with a patch of scratched, pink skin that oozed blood while I showered.

As I walk down the bright, white hallway, my lunch heaves forward in my stomach. Though I remember chewing it into a pulpy mush, the chicken takes shape, evolving into a fat, feathered mass that weighs me down. I suddenly want nothing more than to return home, so that I can turn up the air conditioner and sit on my bed with a cold glass of water wedged between my bare feet.

The patient is only six years old and her chin quivers as she speaks. The overhead lights expose tear tracks on her cheeks. She reminds me of Ameneh. I adjust my headscarf and push up my sleeves. The small girl attempts a smile but her mouth collapses into a frown.

A nurse has positioned the girl on a sheet of crisp wax paper. She’s wriggling and writhing like the worms I sometimes pluck with my naked fingers from the circle of hydrangeas Baba joon planted before he passed on. I always accidentally kill the worms and their blood ends up underneath my fingernails. Today, my fingernails are clean.

The young girl is wailing and her mouth hangs open. I stroke her damp forehead and notice that for a gasping instant she stops crying. But the moment the nurse pulls up her skirt she starts again. I know what it feels like. Too many people assume doctors only give shots, and that they never receive them. I hate sitting and waiting for the impending sting in your right leg, or the muscle-pinch in your left shoulder.

Two other nurses agree to help us. We leave the little girl no choice but to remain very still, still enough so the needle doesn’t puncture skin it isn’t supposed to. I glance over at her and notice that in the pale blueness, her face glistening with drying tears, she looks most like Ameneh. The thought drives my heart straight to my stomach. Suddenly the needle feels too heavy in my hand.

The procedure is finally over. The wax paper crinkles as I fold it into a neat, translucent square. The girl’s face is hidden behind her mother’s head. I imagine that they’re exchanging soft pecks on the cheek. I throw away the trash and turn to leave: My mouth feels dry and I’m craving a long sip of ice water.

My throat feels alive again. I’ve swallowed enough water to sustain the hydrangeas for at least two weeks. Before I walk to my office I notice that the girl is leaving, with one hand pressed into her mother’s palm and the other flapping at her side. I stare at her. At that moment, she spins around and smiles.

Yesterday I discovered one of Ameneh's diary entries in the tight space between her bed and the wall: *Maman joon, there is a picture of us when we were much younger. You were trying to kiss my cheek but I pulled away. And the picture is just a blurry whir in the middle where our faces were supposed to meet.*