

A Fall to Grace

When Thomasina imagined her wedding day, she hadn't conjured up the flower girl's middle finger crushed in the limo door. Or the judge's phlegmy cough. Mostly, she hadn't anticipated her husband's fixation on her maid of honor, specifically the thigh-high slit of Brenda's dress.

Thomasina's pointy-toed shoes pinched, her lipstick had smeared and she couldn't find Greg anywhere in the cobalt and gunmetal weddingscape, aka the Garden Room. She limped down the carpeted hallway. A commotion from the hotel bar attracted her attention. She veered inside. Near the back wall were Greg and Brenda, her dress-slit hiked even higher. They were in the process of emptying a bottle of Stoli into a rowdy bunch of strangers' shot glasses. Just as Thomasina was about to open her mouth, the wedding photographer grabbed her elbow and swiped at her lipstick with a napkin. "There you are," he said. "I've scoured this hotel looking for you. I need one of just you, on the hotel staircase. The money shot."

Greg stopped pouring and beamed a dentally perfect smile Thomasina's way. "Go on with Roger, honey," he said, his words elongated and fuzzy. He turned back to Brenda and the crowd of strangers, "To my wife!" he slurred. Brenda giggled and dabbed at a wet splotch on his gunmetal cummerbund.

Thomasina hesitated. She was already dizzy--too much flat champagne from the day's endless toasts. Brenda's tribute to Greg had been especially effusive. She shrugged and followed Roger. Obviously, Greg was preoccupied.

Of course married men looked at other women. Even men married for three hours and twenty-two minutes. Thomasina could now state that with authority. She climbed the lobby steps, champagne sloshing in her spandex-constricted belly.

Roger adjusted a few gadgets on his camera and called from below, “All the way to the top. That’s it, now turn. Say Mrs. Greg Sprocket.”

She turned. Already, she missed her old name. She’d thought it would be fun to shed her dowdy Beamsley wrapper, the way a snake exchanged a snagged skin for a fresher, zippier version.

“Now, give me a glam smile, lots of teeth, that’s it,” Roger coaxed, as if they both didn’t know he was moonlighting from the mall kiosk where he sold acne remedies. She scanned the lobby below. No Greg. Probably still drinking with Brenda. Or worse.

She’d bet the squat tea set from Aunt Sue she wasn’t the only bride whose husband had gone missing with a voluptuous maid of honor. No doubt hundreds of grooms ducked into corners with drunken bridal attendants. With so many people on this damned planet anymore, no behavior went untried. Could it be that there was nothing new under the sun? That was Ecclesiastes 1:9, more or less. Thomasina wasn’t religious, but she knew these things. Greg wouldn’t have known that. He would have thrust that sculpted nose of his into the air and guessed Shakespeare. He guessed Shakespeare for everything.

Was there anything that really was new under the sun, she wondered. At Roger’s orders, she forced her lips into an upward curl, wracking her brains to come up with something no one had ever done before. That had been a favorite childhood game of hers. She would utter nonsense words and then do something silly, like lick ketchup

from the bottle and hop on one foot in a tight circle and wonder if she was the only one in the world who had ever performed that precise sequence of events. But linking a string of unlikely acts didn't constitute new. Or did it?

"The shot would be perfect if you just stepped out onto that ledge, with the chandelier in the background," Roger called up to her.

"Jesus," Thomasina said. She gathered her layered skirts and planted one heel at a time onto the ledge, a narrow ring of a catwalk far above the lobby, fenced in by a curlicue gold railing. Her left ankle buckled, and the frizz of French curls at her temples lurched. The chandelier, now almost within reach, blazed through hundreds of acrylic prisms. Her Yves Saint Laurent foundation beaded on her forehead.

Flashes, clicks, whirrings. Roger gave her a thumbs-up. "Come back to earth, doll. It's a beauty," he called.

Thomasina doubted that. She contemplated her path back to the Garden Room. She would have to squeeze herself from the ledge and descend the steep staircase. All this on two throbbing feet. Where was freaking Roger? He might have helped. Another one of Greg's genius friends. She knew they should have hired a real photographer.

She swallowed hard and attempted a step. The shoes had to go... She fought with her mountainous skirts, bent, and freed her right foot from its dainty prison. She gasped. What used to be her foot was a swollen mass of unsavory colors. Raw red edged into mottled yellow, fading into a cyanotic blue that feathered into listless white, where the circulation had stopped altogether. She imagined that beneath her white finery, the rest of her body, packed into a steel-like web of undergarments, was fast following suit. She was

in the process of becoming a putrid version of herself, the underbelly of some diabolical rainbow. On her wedding day, of all things. Could it get any worse?

When she bent over and tugged at her other shoe, her veil caught in the ornate gold railing. She yanked at it, but it wouldn't budge. The bridal coiffure specialist had proclaimed he was doing her a favor when he'd lacquered her mound of natural frizz directly into her headpiece. Sweat moistened her palms.

It occurred to Thomasina that perhaps she was the first bride to perch on a ledge high above her wedding party, half-shoeless, with her veil, hence her head, stuck in a curlicue gold railing. Again, did a string of unlikely events constitute new? There had to be rules about such things. She worked to calm herself, but a cold sweat sprouted all over, dampening her innermost layers.

With shaking fingers, she twisted, then clawed at the intersection of veil with railing, rested, then clawed some more. It was time to make a scene. She looked down. Sometime during her efforts at extrication, the lobby beneath her had emptied, gone dead quiet. She would have to scream.

She took a deep breath and opened her mouth to bellow. At that precise instant, deafening music swelled from the Garden Room just out of sight through the archway below, followed by a joyous whoop. "It's electric!"

She closed her mouth. Great. She would have to wait. At least she got to miss the Electric Slide. She had never gotten the hang of that one, everyone on the dance floor pivoting as one, propelled by some collective intelligence. Then clapping, screaming, and within the span of a heartbeat, "Do the Hustle!" Another one. Did every guest at her

wedding love to line dance? What kind of idiots did she have for friends? Actually, most of the guests were Greg's friends.

As the song raged on, a pair of teenagers appeared directly below. "Hey," she yelled, waving whatever white layers she could reach. "Help!" They looked up. One stuffed what looked like a pack of cigarettes under his shirt and they both broke into a run. "Wait, Jesus Christ, stop, you goddamn imbecilic Sprocket offspring!"

Thomasina stifled tears and worked to pry off her other shoe, only to find that foot, too, a bulging, discolored mess. She slapped and chafed at her feet. In her frantic efforts, her veil became more stuck than before. Now, she couldn't even straighten up.

The Chicken Dance began to blare.

Her French-manicured fingertips slashed at her veil, but it held fast, its fibers tough as a cop's bulletproof vest. They ought to send soldiers to the front in these get-ups, she thought. "Somebody! Anybody! Up here!" she yelled. She flailed and twisted. One of her loathsome shoes sailed from the ledge.

"Shit," she said. She leaned hard into the railing and grabbed for it.

As soon as she reached, she knew.

The bolt that anchored the section of railing with the vise-like grip on her head snapped from its base. "Shit," she said again. All the way down the line, she heard the festive pops as more bolts failed. Then, out of the corner of one eye, Thomasina watched the slow-motion separation of railing from ledge, her head stuck fast to a length of gold, a drum major's baton for an unlikely parade. She tried to grip the ledge with her bruised toes, but gravity, as always, trumped intention.

Thomasina launched from the precipice, a shimmering bridal comet attached to a length of gold. Her pearl and diamond-encrusted tiara dove first, then her bespangled torso, followed by her sparkling train, puffy and winglike. Her maimed feet dangled in space behind.

The flight from ledge to floor lasted long enough for Thomasina to wonder if other brides had gone from nuptial to funeral altar all in one day. If they would dress her in something a bit cozier for her final farewell. If her flight across the lobby at last constituted something new.

She didn't see the guests as they guzzled the dregs of their drinks in a mass exodus from the Garden Room, picking through the potted topiary now splatted with errant bits of lace and beads and blood. Nor did she hear the sirens of the ambulance, or Greg urging Brenda to close her eyes before she fainted into his arms.

Thomasina stood up and brushed herself off. It seemed she should feel worse after plunging head first from a balcony. As it was, she seemed fine. Intact, even. What was that hallway in front of her? She looked behind her. Darkness. The hallway was the only possible route. It was lined with oozy sorts of mirrors. Her reflection danced on either side of her.

“Sprockets, you're on,” a man in a police uniform shouted.

“Goddammit, this wasn't on the schedule today,” a debonair man in a tweed jacket insisted.

“Scheduled or not, there she is.” He pointed to Thomasina now picking her way down the corridor. She brushed a frizz of French curls from her eye.

“She isn’t a Sprocket,” a woman with a platinum beehive said and looked away.

“Has to be.”

“Over here, Sprocket,” the police-type called to Thomasina. The end of the corridor squirted her out with a jolt.

“It’s Thomasina,” she said. She couldn’t feel her mouth move, or her bare feet on the shiny surface beneath her. Her skin felt strangely uncomfortable, but the discomfort was outside the domain of hot or cold. “Thomasina Beamsley,” she continued, with as much authority as she could manage.

“Nope. Not possible.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. Thomasina Sprocket, I am. I suppose.”

“What do you mean you suppose? Another Sprocket genius, I see. And not nearly as good looking as the rest of us,” a man in a tuxedo said.

Platinum beehive lady flipped a compact open and peered at her rouged face in the mirror. “She really can’t be a Sprocket. Call in the Beamsleys,” she said.

“Sorry, three hour rule. If she’d crashed a half hour earlier, she could have been a Beamsley. We’re stuck with her,” Tuxedo Man said. He scratched his head. “Whoops!” With that, he disappeared into an orange puff.

Everyone screamed.

“Where am I?” Thomasina asked. “And what happened to him?” She stared at the spot where Tuxedo Man had been. An orange vapor swirled a few times and then settled around them in a dusty mist. Platinum Beehive swept up the dust and dumped it into a metal can.

“Can someone please help me?” The faces around Thomasina watched with a startling lack of interest. “Who are you people? Ever heard of helping a stranger? Good Samaritan laws and all that?”

“God, I hate that. Rookies. Always wanting answers. Do you play video games?” a rakish looking young man in a fedora asked.

Thomasina shook her head no.

“Ever see anyone play video games?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Well then, you’ll understand that we can’t answer your question. You’ve arrived at another level, as frustrating and pointless as the one you just left.”

“Oh.” Thomasina smoothed the rumpled folds of her wedding dress. Of everything that felt so wrong right now, the ridiculous yardage of satin and netting and beads and tulle bothered her the most. “Can I at least go somewhere to change?”

The assembled Sprockets laughed.

“Nope. You’re not really dressed. You just think you are. Like a paper doll with underwear pressed on permanently. When you exit, you come through the door in whatever you were wearing when you left. Looks like you were at a costume party. Dressed up as a bride.”

“I am a bride.”

The Sprockets laughed again.

“Jesus,” Thomasina said.

“Jesus? Seems like I’ve been here for an eternity and I haven’t met *him* yet,” one of the Sprockets said.

“Like he’d hang around with an idiot Sprocket,” the police-type sneered.

“Best looking idiots in the place,” Platinum Beehive cooed.

“Shit,” Thomasina said.

“Foul-mouthed little bitch of a bride,” Fedora Guy said.

Thomasina flounced over to Platinum Beehive. “I need to talk to whoever is in charge here,” she said.

The whole group hooted and slapped their knees. “And who do you think that would be? Pick one. Walter Cronkite? John Lennon? Joan Rivers? What’s your preference?” Platinum Beehive said.

Thomasina sat down on her mound of skirts. “Am I dead?” she asked.

“If not, you’re well on your way. I’d say the fact you’re here isn’t a good sign,” a flashy old woman in the corner pronounced. She drew on a cigarette through a studded holder, her lips puckering into a thousand wrinkles.

“Oh dear. Is this hell?”

“Good God, you must be a Sprocket after all. Do you see fire or pitchforks?”

At the sound of approaching footsteps, everyone flattened against the edges of the room. Thomasina stood alone in the center.

“Welcome,” said a youngish woman. She sported a gray pageboy and high heels, and clutched a clipboard in one hand and a pair of white plastic eyeglasses in the other.

“Thomasina Sprocket. This is most unexpected. I don’t find you anywhere on today’s list. Were you tired?”

“Of what?” Thomasina asked.

“I don’t know. When someone jumps the gun, so to speak, usually they’re all worn out.”

Thomasina began to cry. That’s what she was, exactly. All worn out. “That’s just what I am,” Thomasina managed to utter, between sobs, “but I didn’t jump. It was an accident.”

The Sprockets began to laugh again.

“Stop. Enough,” Gray Pageboy scolded. “You’ll all be disappearing into puffs if you keep that up.”

“Might be a blessing,” Cigarette Grandma muttered.

“I heard that,” Gray Pageboy said. She turned to Thomasina. “This isn’t a warm welcome from your family now, is it?”

“They aren’t my family. I don’t even know them.”

“Oh dear, how disconcerting. We’re working on that, the way we organize the newly-deads and nearly-deads. Ours is such an archaic system. But who should meet a new arrival? People with similar interests? From the same town? With the same favorite colors? Parakeet trainers with other parakeet trainers? All sorts of possibilities. The family thing used to work until the last, oh, who knows, but families have become a veritable rat’s nest these days, a little of this, a little of that. And everyone is so mouthy. Used to be you just changed your name and went with the flow. Management is well aware of the problems.”

“I’d fire the management here in a heartbeat,” Fedora Guy said.

Gray Pageboy ignored him. “What to do with you,” she said to Thomasina.

Thomasina shrugged. “Where am I? Am I stuck here?...Am I dead?”

“Well, not officially.” Gray Pageboy looked over her clipboard to Thomasina’s feet. “You still have your feet.”

Thomasina looked around her. Everyone else had either bases or skids, or worse, roots that sank partially into the floor around them and straggled after them when they moved, like strands of spaghetti. She lifted her bare feet, misshapen and the color of flaming bruises. Still, they were her feet.

Everyone gasped.

“Why does she get to keep hers?”

“That’s the first thing that goes around here,” Gray Pageboy explained. “Except for management, but that’s not you. You wouldn’t have come in this entrance. So, no, the jury is still out on you. Apparently, you’re not quite dead. What’s your case?”

“My case?” Thomasina looked down at the folds of her wedding dress.

“Your case. Apparently, you’re an undecided. Why should we let you pop back out the way you came? What do you have left to accomplish that requires an extension?”

Thomasina shrugged. She was a mess, inside and out. The dress said it all, a cobbled together bunch of netting and spangles. Luxury without harmony. Finery without elegance. The Garden Room waitresses in their black smocks had more style. “I don’t have one.”

“You must have a case. This world can be a long one if you come in directionless, like most of the Sprockets here.” The Sprockets began to jeer and wave their hands about. “Sorry, you all know it’s true. Think about that while you sit here for eons waiting to puff.”

“What happens when you...puff?” Thomasina pointed at the orange bits in the metal can.

“Don’t know. You didn’t know what happened at the end of the last level, did you? Some here believe nothing happens at all, that you sit in a can for eternity as bits of whatever color puff you happened to be. Oh, dear, Mr. Harley Sprocket was that?” Gray Pageboy peered into the can. “Orange. Nice bright orange.”

“And?” Thomasina prompted.

“Some believe that a very specific hierarchy exists, the ROYGBIV ascendance to another level. If that’s so, Harley didn’t make it too far, now, did he? Still, others believe that certain behaviors facilitate early puffing, which some view as a good thing and others fear mightily. In other words, as confusing as the last level, but less fun. For example, limited activities. No sex.”

“Oh.” Thomasina tried to think if fun described anything about the life she’d only just left.

“So, your case.”

“My case...Are there rules? Do I have a set number of words? A judge?”

Gray Pageboy waved her glasses. “Heavens, no. A filibuster or a murmur, it’s all the same. No judge necessary. What you say will either be true, or it won’t. You’ll either go back out there...” She pointed vaguely at the corridor that had expelled her. It looked almost alive, wiggling in the background like a puppy anxious to get back to its play. “Or you’ll stay.”

Thomasina sat, speechless. It dawned on her that the next words she uttered would be the most important in her entire life. But instead of rising to the occasion, her

brain drifted into irrelevant corners. Odd questions popped into her head. Why didn't any of the residents here, if that's what you called them, bother with first names? And on the subject of names, why did that guy in the song she hated on the oldies station go to the desert on a horse with no name and then *never* bother to name his horse? Why didn't any of the Sprockets arrive in the after-life in hospital gowns or at least pajamas? What had happened to the sky? And, for God's sake, why wasn't she able to seize on a sense of purpose when it mattered most? She cleared her throat to buy time.

Gray Pageboy shifted on her high heels. "Okay, to answer your questions. One, first names don't matter here. You've gone from a very specific world to one that's more general, subsuming, if you catch my drift. Two, it's just a song and not a very good one. Three, Sprockets rarely make it to a hospital, and even if they do, they tend to sneak out for a pint of pistachio ice cream or a few beers, more likely both, where they exit, or die, as you say. Also, they like to dress up. Four, the sky will, from now on, become only a memory, assuming you remain here. Five, the sense of purpose problem, well, that one's all yours."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"It's my job. I'm management."

Again, the Sprockets jeered. They began to disperse, although none of them strayed far, saddled as they were with a lack of feet. Most of them just circled around a bit and watched Thomasina from a new vantage point.

Thomasina shuddered, feeling a bit naked. If minds were as transparent as those disturbing skeleton fish that swam in her childhood aquarium, why bother to wrap the

bodies here in clothes? “You don’t have to answer that,” she said without waiting for Gray Pageboy to jump in. “Unless you want to.”

“Minds are only transparent to management. And clothes, why not? Think of them as sort of a snapshot, an easy way to identify each other. For example, you’ve chosen how you want to see me. By the way, believe it or not, your version of me is refreshing. Most of the younger new arrivals see me as a smart phone. Really, so dull. More cliché-ridden than this sophisticated secretary nonsense you’ve conjured up. So, let’s get on with it. Plead your case.”

Thomasina was growing weary of all these people. Or were they post-people? Maybe pre-puffers. “What’s the point? You already know what I’m thinking. You must know my case, as you put it, as well as I do. Better.”

Gray Pageboy put on the eyeglasses she’d dangled since her arrival. She pulled a stool from the edge of the hall and sat. “Well, the truth is I don’t. Mindreading is woefully unselective.” She paused to let her words sink in. “While I know the whole of your thought, I don’t know what it all means. What’s most important to you, for instance... In such a delicate and critical situation, I need to understand your priorities. You have the chance to relegate what is front and center in your brain to mere dust-bunnies, and vice versa. In other words, clean it up in there, dear. Take your time. Get to the point, the crux of the matter. Hone in on the truth about why you need to return to your old life.”

Thomasina brightened a little. Return to her old life. As pathetic as it was, it beat this one. She looked around at the gaggle of Sprockets who seemed to do nothing but waddle around on their tentacles and sling insults. “I’ll do anything to get out of here.”

“Boo!” a Sprocket yelled. He flapped his arms in a jacket cluttered with ads for soft drinks and lubrication products, automobile and otherwise. “Boo!” He cupped his palms around his mouth and boomed some more. The rest chimed in from their various perches. Gray Pageboy smacked her clipboard into the wall. Silence fell.

“Pay no attention to the Sprockets,” she said. “Half of them dig in here for centuries before they even understand the assignment. This level is an evaluative level. Contemplative. Some even enjoy it, maybe you will, if you end up staying. Think of yourself as a jeweler with her loop, analyzing each facet of your life from now until...”

“Until I puff.”

“I knew you were a quick study. I must say, I’m rooting for you, but that won’t influence the outcome. So, speak now, or forever hold your peace. Or your discomfort, as the case may be.”

Thomasina closed her eyes against the wall of Sprocket faces and their weird footless forms. How had she come to this? She tried to think about Greg, Brenda, and her unfortunate exit from her wedding reception, but the images were thin and slipped through her mind like broth through a slotted spoon.

Far clearer were unbidden memories from her past. She saw it all, her earnestness as a child. How eager she was to follow the rules. How she expected others to do the same. Her best friend, Clinton Hines, such a soul mate. They had played after school every day, raised ants, invented dirt soup and dandelion salad in case they were ever lost in the woods and couldn’t get home in time for dinner. They had become blood-blisters, that was her idea, since they couldn’t technically be blood-brothers or blood-sisters and blisters was a funny word. She thought they would be together always.

And then, there it was, that moment. She and Clinton on the swings in her back yard. She had the beginnings of boobs. “Boobs and pubes,” she said to Clinton, as if what happened to their bodies simply unfolded. At the time, that’s what she believed.

She saw Clinton looking at her as if from the other side of an abyss, where the lighting, the language, the rules had all changed, stretching and contracting and shaping their simple lives into something entirely new, more elastic than the taffy at the Jersey shore. Clinton had his own version of boobs and pubes going on. And more.

“I’m in love with Carol Bateman,” he blurted out. “I’m going to marry her.”

“Why?” Thomasina asked.

“Because her hair is like gold silk.”

Gold silk? What did that mean?

The video in Thomasina’s head screeched to a standstill. She wanted to escape, return to the part of her life that occurred after she’d already learned to shut out the pain, those years of meaningless existence with the likes of Greg Sprocket and Brenda with the auburn hair and naked thigh, but her mind wouldn’t have it.

She saw it all, the tips of her red Keds skidding in the patch of dusty earth under her swing. She felt it again, the invisible knife that drew blood even before she managed to look up at Clinton.

“I have to go eat dinner,” was all she’d said.

After dinner, she’d looked long and hard in the mirror. Brown fuzz stuck out from her ponytail. Her new boobs parted ways, each facing the world sideways. Carol with the gold silk hair had boobs that both pushed forward.

Her brain focused and froze on that frame. Thomasina smoothed the folds of her wedding dress. Gray Pageboy was right. She'd always been a quick study. The mental video resumed rolling.

Thomasina watched the disintegration of herself in compressed time. She heard the way others said her name, a joke in junior high when boys were asking girls to the Autumn Leaves dance. "What about Thomasina Beamsley?" The hysterical laughter. Her parents, stumbling around in their awkward Beamsley bodies, apparently pleased that they'd visited their flaws on an offspring. And she saw herself, desperate to survive the pain of growing up, with its rules that had changed overnight, rules that once allowed her to pump to grand heights on painted wooden swings with Clinton, and then part ways with him forever over hair like gold silk.

Thomasina knew that Gray Pageboy saw everything she thought, but she remained silent. Her next words would shape her future.

And then it occurred to her. Did she even want to return to her old life? The Sprockets were becoming familiar. And really, her Beamsley body wasn't as out of place as it might have been. All faces, even handsome ones, seemed a bit comical grounded in skids or strands. Maybe this life would be easier than the last. Was it a sign, perhaps, that she'd spent the last few hours of her earthly life in cramped shoes ruining her feet?

The video reel of her life amped up double-time. More images. Digging for coquinas in the sand in Wildwood as if there were no greater purpose in life. Hot pavement under bare feet. She and Clinton on a roller coaster, breath whooshing, brains scrambled, innards aloft. Joy. Pure, seductive joy. Could it be that she wasn't ready to

dig in and contemplate the totality of her existence, like some tentacled Buddha-bride under an ersatz Bodhi tree. Could it be that another moment of joy yet awaited her?

That's what she wanted. One more snippet of joy, unspoiled by the self-loathing that led her to annihilate herself under the crushing smugness of Greg Sprocket and Brenda. It was as clear as the gelatinous tendrils sticking out from Nascar Sprocket's legs--she had never expected anyone to love her. She had given up on deserving love. And equally clear, Greg had married her so she would cook his meals, fill out his paperwork, iron his shirts, and most especially, play the grateful ugly duckling to his Adonis. How had she wasted so much of her life on a mission to humiliate herself? But she knew why. She had to do it herself, so that others wouldn't do it to her. For her. But back to joy.

She wouldn't find joy in this footless world. Already, she felt a little like wallpaper. Were her feet still there? She was too afraid to look. Where was Clinton now? Had he married Carol with her mane of gold silk? Was it too late for her to pop back into her old self, probably broken and bleeding by now, and wrest any germ of joy from it? She looked at Gray Pageboy.

"Yes, your feet are still there," Gray Pageboy said. "Clinton is in Indianapolis. No, he didn't marry Carol. As to whether there is still joy to be found, that one's all yours. And I won't answer any more questions. I've been far too patient already."

Maybe she could chase down Clinton, persuade him that even without gold silk for hair, she was still special. Hadn't she always been a quick study? Even Gray Pageboy said as much. Her mental video slowed. The strange room, full of shiny floors and jeering

Sprockets began to draw her in. The corridor that had disgorged her began to darken and shrink.

Thomasina squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head.

She forced herself to free-fall back into her memories, to stop shaping them into plans or escape hatches. Gray Pageboy had warned her that truth was the only way out. Her concentration deepened. The smell of salty air filled her nostrils, bringing with it a hint of childhood vacations at the Jersey shore, an olfactory palimpsest. She tried to stay with it, but in the crowded room of Sprockets, the scent disappeared, lost in the droplet-like atmosphere that held all of them in a perpetual state of reflection. She opened her eyes to find the corridor now only a shadow.

With all her might, Thomasina conjured up the sea breeze again, this time a thick gust of salt-laced air, pregnant with so much more truth than her collage of recollections. She sucked it in, heavy with long-evolving life, tides, algae, tinged with coconut oil, cotton candy, petroleum, sunshine. The whole of it caught in the back of her throat. As if she were standing on a windswept beach, she saw a seagull in flight high above a sun-splotched ocean. Wings outstretched, it soared across a blue sky.

She coughed a little and then heard herself announce, "I want to go to the beach."

The corridor behind her lit up, opened wide and scooped her inside. She hung onto her veil.

A sensation of falling. A blur of tubes and beeps and bandages. Her eyes opened to the nearly blinding glare of a harsh and urgent world.

“What did you say?” A man’s face hovered over hers. In a flash, a team of blue-clad attendants prodded her with gloved hands and flashing steel gadgets. Bright lights hurt her eyes. She heard words like coma and miracle.

But that first face. Who was that? He was familiar. It was a handsome face but the sight of it sickened her. Oh, one of them. By now, she should be able to spot a Sprocket a mile away. That was Greg, her husband, wasn’t it? He had a beard, now. His hair was longish, like a rock star, or an actor going for that pseudo-scruffy mystique. How long had she lain here? She tried to sit up, but her body was stuck in a network of casts and fluid-filled lines. Greg had a woman with him. Bright auburn hair. Brenda. It hurt to move her eyelids, but she raised them up to look beyond the swarming team of doctors and nurses. She searched for a glimpse of sunlight.

“I want to go to the beach,” Thomasina repeated, through a throat so parched that her voice scratched its sides and the taste of blood filled her mouth. Her eyes scoured the room. Greg and Brenda were pressed against a wall, mouths agape, fingers intertwined. She pictured their feet interlaced as well, but she couldn’t sit up to see them. She didn’t care. Already, she was elsewhere. She wanted to see the relentless collision of wave against sand, sunlight fractured, then whole on the ocean surface, a show for the sake of no one. Sheer and purposeless majesty.

Thomasina closed her eyes and sank into her pillow. Beeps from a machine near her head reminded her of a flock of seagulls even now squawking their way across a cloud-scudded Jersey sky. As soon as she had the strength, she would squeal with joy.