

Entropy

You roll over to find her up already, doing her yoga as usual. The curtains are flung open, and the jaundiced light from the large window that's the apartment's best feature gilds her. At moments like this you understand why her parents named her after a mythological princess. She's naked and unashamed as if she's never heard of Eden. It's not an uncommon state for her morning practice. She's gained a neighborhood-wide reputation; you'd protest if you didn't like watching her so much yourself. She arches her back and reaches behind her, and you watch the livid stripes of stretch marks score the sides of her breasts as the skin tightens. When you told her you loved the pearly puckers, she laughed at you and hid her face in the pillow.

Now she stands and stretches and you see a swelling you don't recognize from your repeated inventory of her body, just a little bump to disturb the line of her breast. You frown and let your head drop back to the pillow. It doesn't fade into her body as the angle changes. Parallax - the distortion caused by the discrepancy in light as the angle of viewing changes. It doesn't vanish when you blink either. Your fingers on the covers tremble. Since your aunt died of cancer you're paranoid, but it can't be anything or she would have told you. Truth and beauty are what she lives by, as you survive on Einstein's special theory of relativity. You reassure yourself you must have imagined it and dress for your run.

"Are you going out? Sure you don't want to try this?" she asks, contorting her body into something that looks not only unnatural, but incredibly painful. Still she smiles up from the floor.

"That's all right. I could never learn the names of the whatevers."

"Asanas."

"I think you're enough of a spectacle. I'll be back in a little while." You touch her hair and leave. She tries incessantly to convert you to yoga, but it seems so pointless and low impact next to the knee jarring reality of running. You like breathing hard, picturing the metabolic changes as you pant, doubled over. There are no mantras for running. You like to sweat. Catcalls you can deal with, but not New Agers. Yoga has been cheapened in your eyes, robbed of any spiritual value it might have had by the over-eager public. Asanas have gone the way of tarot cards and Buddha statues. You're sure you'll see a Dummies book any day. Running is an industry, but you haven't bought into the merchandise, just the culture. It's a hard sport, like your hard sciences. Ariadne - Ari, you call her sometimes instead of Ria, or on occasion Fairy - seems all softness and it frightens you even as you find yourself sinking into her life. Even her name is tender and romantic, the confined princess with her magic string. So you run every morning, keeping your tryst with the pavement as faithfully as a postal worker. But you stay with her too. Today you push yourself harder than normal, trying to convince yourself you imagined the flaw in the curve of her. Your mind begins to wander over the subject of her, wondering why she's even with you, different as you are.

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Chemistry and physics: that's mostly what you bring to this relationship. Hard science for you, and hers the study of soft things. She's the charmed quark to your strange quark, with a dizzy spin that would drive a quantum physicist mad. The first time you saw her, you didn't think that she was beautiful; you longed for a photometer to measure her output of candela. From your little table in the corner, you studied her. Never imagining yourself poetic, you saw her as a photon instead of a butterfly. Ariadne, they called her, and you listened too. Not until you found out that her father taught mythology and her mother was a minor starlet did you understand. She was raised on yoga and golden apples, and wore rhinestone sunglasses with her wax wings. But she's in no danger of falling from the sky, and it's your own pinions dripping into puddles on the floor around your feet. It's her proximity that liberates you, and the exuberance that could be quantified in calories. You've studied quantum physics and know you don't need wings to fly anyway.

Once you shared this thought with her and came home to find her curled up with *A Brief History of Time*, scribbling new annotations next to yours with a red ballpoint. Always she writes in red, preferring paint pens with thick ink the colour of a strontium flare that never quite coagulates properly on the paper. Your hands are forever printed with ghosts of her words. She writes notes and leaves them everywhere for you to find. Mostly they're not romantic; quite a few have quotes from books she's borrowed from your special shelf. Beckett. Hawking. Eiseley. On her shelf are Ensler, Winterson, Tolkein, things you've read, but only at her request. There isn't much in them for you, but it's easier to understand her mythology with a few fables filed away in your mind. You miss your books while she takes her time poring over them, but you can hardly begrudge her the days it takes her to read each one through. Going back to the prodigal volumes, you find new phrases starred and underlined, and an excess of question marks and exclamation points. Once she stuck together all the pages of her copy of *The Hobbit*. After that you bought the ballpoints and hid her pens, at least while she was around the bookshelf.

Somehow lately the shelves have been getting disorganized. You plan to put them back in order, but your days are filled with studying, and your evenings with her. And now this new thing to occupy your mind, this lump. You don't forget about it, but you don't ask her either. This time you want what you see to be an illusion - if it hasn't been proven to be there, it isn't there - but you can't let it go. She tries telling you her breasts are sore, but you knew she's in the middle of her cycle. You promise to be gentle, and she relents. And there, as you run your fingers over her skin, there - a nodule of tissue firmer than the rest. You close your eyes and kiss her, pretending not to notice, and phone the doctor as soon as you leave the house, borrowing her cell phone. The receptionist hangs up on you when you try to inquire if Ariadne Phillips has been in lately. The orderly orbitals of your mind have switched theories from physics to biology. At the library, you have to inquire for books, and the librarian casts sideways eyes at you; you've never asked before for help navigating the long bays.

When you get home you open your mouth to confront her and close it again. She looks at you curiously.

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"Anything wrong?"

"Just a long day. I missed you." She needs to tell you if something's wrong without your having to ask, your pride asserts. So you go to kiss her and circumvent the subject, approaching it tangentially. You find one of those self-exam reminder tags and hang it in the shower. You even start flossing in the bathroom just in case she says anything. She teases you that she feels like one of your projects, but nothing more. Your fear for her and anger at her collide and amplify. You run longer routes now and tuck her notes in the pockets. All your clothes take on a pinkish tinge from the ink stains going through the wash. Sometimes you take her shirts from the laundry to wear, putting your nose to your shoulder to smell her. Watching her, you attend her funeral, deliver a lengthy eulogy, and visit her grave once a week carrying all the dandelions you can find. She always liked them, saying they were neglected. She notices your distance and carries a crease between her eyebrows like a graph of absolute value: pointed. You tell her you have a lot on your mind and she crosses her arms and purses her lips. You wonder what her headstone will say and decide she's the type of person to choose cremation. And so it goes for two weeks or so, until her mother calls you from the hospital.

In chemistry, Hund's Rule states that electrons will fill all available suborbitals, always wanting to remain single in their orbit. You used to live by that until she appeared, a model of wave-particle duality and sinusoidal curves. Hydrogen, light and unpredictable with you her single circling electron. You still wonder quite how she came into your life, a whole new uncertainty principle. You'd seen her around at the few parties you'd been coerced into attending. Maybe she knew a few of your friends. At any rate, you watched her circulate, colliding with people and rebounding with no momentum lost. You wondered how she managed to make such perfectly elastic collisions when you always lost energy having to deal with people. It never seemed important enough to talk to her about, just something to ponder for the requisite time you had to stay before it was polite to leave. Then you passed her one night, saw her dancing in a small group. She was radiant with noise and energy, but when you touched her shoulder, she turned to face you and stilled. For lack of anything else to say, you asked her to go to the bookshop. After two hours of browsing the science journals while she flipped through entertainment magazines and read bits from a collection of Aristophanes, you walked back with her to get her things and gave her a ride home. She wrote her number on the inside of your forearm with her red paint pen and vanished. You sped off, but even with all the windows rolled down, you could still smell the honeysuckle of her shampoo. The digits stayed on your arm for a week. After five days you capitulated and called. She told you to come over for dinner and you spent the evening eating pasta and grapes and watching reruns of *The X-Files* while you pointed out the scientific inaccuracies. She laughed and said it was only television. You went home feeling effervescent. Something was bubbling out of you and dissipating into the night haze. Now you feel fear seeping in.

She's sitting on the edge of the bed in a paper gown when you arrive. You hand her the bag you found packed in the closet.

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"So why do you need to stay? Are they doing tests?" You clip off the words like the pulse of an X-ray machine, dropping the fictional ignorance you've maintained. She shakes her head and looks at the posters on the wall and then at her knees, exposed by the wrinkled hem of the insufficient gown.

"They've already run everything they need to."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She gestures uselessly, her hands fluttering. Never have you seen her look so fragile. Just a butterfly after all, short-lived and decorative with no practical purpose. "I didn't want you to worry. I didn't want you...to be hurt." Even her voice, piping at you like a child, and her knees protruding to further the image. You've seen strength in her before, different from yours but identifiable. You thought her sense of identity denoted courage. Was it just another role?

"And finding out like this isn't supposed to hurt? Thanks, Ari. It's good to find out that truth is important to you in a relationship." It isn't fair but you say it anyway. In your mind, she's been gone a long time. Speaking ill of the dead doesn't do any harm. You've already worked through denial to anger. She whispers but her eyes are dry, watching you pace off the tiles.

"I didn't think it would last this long." Her voice is stronger now, and her back is straighter.

"Didn't think what would last? Us?" She's not apologizing either. This is more resistance than I expected, from the way she cast her eyes down when I came in.

"Us. Remission. I was going to tell you."

"Oh, and when would that have been? 'Take your darks to the cleaners, love, you'll need them for the funeral?'"

An edge creeps into her voice. "It's not as if you didn't know. I saw the way you were tiptoeing around asking. Besides, you were busy with school."

"Of course I knew! That doesn't mean it wouldn't have been better to hear it from you."

"You could have asked. Hubris lives, I suppose."

"Would I have gotten a real answer? I doubt it. How do you ask your lover if they're dying, Ari? Is there a script? I want to see it." She glowers. "God, if you think school is all that I love...that's cruel."

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"Any crueller than what you said to me?" You both lapse into silence. When she doesn't fade like a proper ghost you sigh and drop into a chair. Her mother steps into your tableau at the sudden change in volume and backtracks, saying something about coffee. Ari waves her out.

"How long do you have to stay?" You grit out the words over the hum of the fluorescent lights. She shrugs and the gown rustles.

"This could be the event horizon." She tries to smile, but it crackles at the edges like old paint. She's speaking in your terms. You get up and go to her. Sitting like this, she fits perfectly under your chin as you wrap your arms around her. For a long moment you stay that way, breathing in the warmth of her as it rises from her hair, and then you kiss the top of her head and step back. She crinkles her nose at you and whistles the theme of *The X-Files*. You laugh and wonder that you can at such a time. This time she manages a real smile. "Sorry," she offers. You nod and leave, passing her mother on the way in with a vile-smelling styrofoam cup. Out on the highway, you drive too fast and don't even realize you're crying until the wind of your passage whips the tears into your ears.

You think about the weeks after you first met her, how the two of you would sit on her couch until all hours, sometimes watching television, sometimes you studying while she practiced lines or read. It went on that way for three months. You didn't sleep with her. It wasn't something you knew how to ask, and it didn't occur to you that she'd want you. One night after a few hours of taped *X-Files*, she said she had a pronouncement.

"I think we've studied enough theoretical chemistry. Why don't we work on applied and practical?"

"What, you want to set up an experiment?"

"Something like that," she said, and kissed you. You enjoyed it more than your self-image gave you any right to, the celibate scientist in an ivory tower. There followed the first in a series of experiments in synthesis. That was when you discovered the fading scars on her elbows, her chest, her belly. You tried not to ask, but the scientist in you demanded to know. When you questioned her, working it gently into the conversation - she was teaching you tact - her eyes turned into black holes. She hunched her shoulders and looked away.

"Nothing." After that you started noticing the fact that she was always up much later than you were. The first derivative of fear is insomnia. The second is nightmares. You saw the way she looked at the stars, alternately enthralled and repelled by all that space. When you woke up from the lack of her to find her huddled in the closet among her bright flipflops and sleek heels, you began to understand. Not why - you haven't asked and you're not planning to - but that there is something in her mind that won't let go. In your required biology class, you learned that the two fastest mending tissues in the human body are those of the mouth and rectum. From your twenty-odd years of observation, it seems that the slowest to heal are the mind and the heart.

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The next day, you step into her room with a bunch of fresh violets and a firm resolution to become involved in her disease. Her doctors wouldn't talk to you; her parents told you it was her business to tell me. She is sitting up on top of the sheets when you come in, staring absently at the television.

"Hey," you say, dropping the flowers into a cup of water. "What are you watching?"

"Nothing." She turns off the television and looks at you. "So you're here?"

"I'm here."

"Why?" Her eyes are steady and blue. Faced with her calm, your stomach begins to churn. You thought you'd made your peace with her affliction, but nothing in your research prepared you for this blankness from one usually so animated.

"I want to help."

"Do you have a miracle up your sleeve?"

"The pamphlet said it would be good for you to have someone by you during whatever treatment option you chose." You sit down awkwardly on the edge of her bed. "Will you talk to me about this?"

"I was going to leave you." There is no warmth in her face as she studies you. "You don't need to go through this. I meant for you not to."

"It isn't your choice."

"It would have been. I could still send you away."

"Please don't." She shrugs and looks away. "Ari? Talk to me."

"What is there to talk about?"

"I'd like to know what you're going to do about this."

"This?" She turns back to you, a faint smile curving her lips like an evaporating dish.

"Nothing."

"But there are ways to treat breast cancer," you tell her. "Radiation, if it's a small tumour. You could get a lumpectomy."

"You think I'm not thoroughly informed?" Her eyes glint for a moment, refracting the fluorescent light. "I've heard it all before. Anyway, it isn't breast cancer. It just ended up

there." Your eyebrows collide in puzzlement. She sighs. "It started as colon cancer. It's metastasized."

"Then you can have chemotherapy." You fumble for her hand on the sheets, mind spinning with thoughts like a particle accelerator, nonsensical collisions. Your research turns into useless fragments of information.

"No."

"Ari...."

"No." There seems to have been some sort of reverse alchemy during the night, something to turn her golden softness into iron. "I've had surgery. I've had chemo. I'm not going through that again." Your disbelief fades, leaving coals of anger. Her seeming indifference toward her own life fans your fury.

"Ari, you can't do this."

"But I am. Rather, I'm not."

"I'm not going to sit here and watch you die like this!"

"Then go. Go back to your books. The end of the semester's coming up, after all; you're going to be busy."

"Dammit, Ariadne, don't do this!"

"Look: this is my life. I can do what I want with what's left of it, and I'm not going through chemo again. There isn't any point to it. They won't get all of the cancerous cells."

"But at least it would be doing something. It would get you a little more time." You stand up and start pacing, too worked up to stay still.

"I've had a little more time. It's enough."

"But...."

"No," she says, and her voice is caustic. "This is exactly why I didn't want you here. You don't know what it was like for me before. You don't have any say in my life now."

"I just want..." You try to snap at her, but she cuts you off.

"I want, I want," she parrots. "This isn't about you. It's selfish of you to ask this of me. Go away."

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"Ari, I didn't mean it that way. I want...I'm trying to help. It's stupid of you to throw the rest of your life away." However long she has left, you think, and swallow hard.

"Go away." She lies down with her face pushed into the pillow and won't say anything more. After fifteen minutes, you leave, letting the door click closed behind you. Through the window, she's just a lump under the covers. The sheets look like a shroud. At home, you put blue sheets on the futon for the dark days when she refused to get up; she said it was calming. You were upset the first time it happened, but eventually you got used to it. Almost. For someone usually so sunny, her dark moods were impressively black. You heard her scream and rushed in to find her sobbing in the shower. You stepped in and held her while foam dripped off her breasts and the water made your hair sleek. When the showerhead ran cold, you turned off the taps and wrapped her up in towels and put her to bed on the lumpy futon pad that was all you could afford after the rent and your grad school tuition. She shivered and you lay down next to her and pulled her against you. You skipped class, but the smell of peace on her neck when she finally fell asleep was more compelling than data tables and graphs. Then you napped too, integrating time over the interval of the afternoon. After that, you started leaving the bathroom door open when you took your toothbrush to the kitchen because it still seemed embarrassingly personal to floss in front of her. There isn't any need for that anymore. She probably won't be home.

You never expected something like cancer memories to be the cause of her occasional depression. Most of the time she was fine, exothermic, the radiant woman you thought might be best expressed in candela, the SI unit of light. It was only every now and then that the equilibrium of her mind ran in reverse and left her desperately seeking comfort. The probability that any significant number of people have witnessed her endothermic moments is small to the point of insignificance. She was very careful to stay home or feign sickness when the moods hit. The worst was when she curled up in the cabinets under the sink. If you hadn't been forced to borrow her car keys, you might not have found her. As it was, you only discovered her hiding place because she'd put all the bottles of cleanser in the sink to make room and it looked untidy. You unwrapped her from the plumbing and waited three days for her to speak again. She never tried to kill herself, for which you count yourself fortunate, and the episodes were rare. It was readily apparent that she's afraid of something. Now maybe you know what.

You spend the night reading accounts of cancer patients and holistic healing. It sounds like something she'd do, though you cringe at the thought of calling something so vague and subjective "healing." It sounds like a get rich scheme from Peter Pan instead: "Think happy thoughts and you'll be healed." But she lets you come back as long as you don't mention chemotherapy. Her doctors smile blandly at you and tell you that it her choice. Her parents just look sad. She tells you she visualizes the cancer as a seeded-out dandelion, spreading overactive cells on a bloody breeze. Every so often, you burst out, unable to refrain from trying to convince her to attempt the chemotherapy. She turns chilly eyes on you every time, freezing you. You learn to yell at the pillows instead, back in your apartment. You spend as much of visiting hours as you can with her; she won't let you skip school. Her room is littered

with all your most precious books, and hers. She asks you for a cosmic dog. You bring her a stuffed puppy and she names it Sirius - what else? Her leftover Jell-o gets turned into jiggling architectural wonders. One night you go home and drop into bed; in the morning you find the sink full of dirty dishes and crumbs on the counter. You journey to a foreign section of the bookstore to bring her movie magazines and Time. She asks for Scientific American, too. On days when she's having tests run or doing solitary meditation, she leaves notes for you, worrying that you're not eating right. She knows how you live on ramen noodles and canned peas during paper season. Sometimes you bring her bright things, hats and scarves from other times that you find in thrift shops. Once, on a whim, it is a ball of rainbow yarn. "To help you out of the maze," you tell her. From then, she's never been diagnosed with cancer: she's battling the minotaur. You talk around her illness as if there's hope. If there were, you'd be at home studying, preparing for the rest of your lives.

She gets paler and thinner every week. Even her hair looks sick, dull and greasy in a perpetual ponytail so it won't get in her face when she retches. She looks tarnished. The shadows in the hollows of her cheeks and under her eyes are rusty like her hair. Towards the end, they let you take her out for a few hours to look at the stars. Last summer you taught her the constellations from a starmap and then took her out where she could see them. Her parents lent you a tent and a couple of old Girl Scout sleeping bags, their blessing on your relationship with their daughter. They don't mind that you'll never marry her; they know you would if you could. It was a long drive away from the Los Angeles lights. You lay on your backs, the two of you, and took turns pointing out the patterns named so long ago that their language is dead. Andromeda. Orion. Pegasus. Ursa Minor. You know where they are, but she knows their stories. Pisces, her unsurprising zodiac sign. Sagittarius, yours if you believed in astrology. You told her how and why stars worked and she told you why Orion fades in November. You were ductile that night, stretched from here to eternity and humming with the intensity of her. She remembers the constellations, surprisingly, and points to Andromeda. "Not too long, though. No more chains."

Your heart has been drawn out and coiled to contain the current she produces in you; in your own dark moments, you wrap yourself in figurative fiberglass to soften the jolt of loving her. So far as chemical properties go, she is malleable; she holds the shape she's given. That's why she majored in drama. You've seen a few of her plays with the community theatre and she's quite good.

The only thing that can coax her out of bed on her down days is the prospect of being someone else for a while. Now she can only get up with your help, though her room is filled with flowers from her company. They don't come to visit much; it seems to be theatre season. You check your watch. The nurses will be fretting.

"I know." You gather her up. She smells like dandelions now, the thin bitter hospital scent. You take her home and bathe her with her own perfumed soaps and shampoos, brushing out her hair and putting it in a lumpy braid. You were never very good with the feminine arts, but she doesn't seem to mind. Conscientiously you clean the brush of the matted strands

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afterward. Despite her meditations, her hair is breaking as she gets weaker. The nurses pretend not to notice when you lay down next to her in her antiseptic bed.

It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that disorder increases with time. A few contend that the shattered teacup can jump back up to the table and reassemble itself, but that depends on faith, one of the many things you lack. Order you have in abundance. You leap for the glue and dustpan when the cup starts to teeter, not hoping to save it but to reduce the clutter it will produce. Alone and unable to sleep, you reshelve your books alphabetically by author and categorically and scrub the bathtub until the water sheets off the sides. Equations rule your life: friction, inertia, momentum, heat of formation. Your days occur in discrete packets of memory, and you see no reason to change, though according to society and literature, she obliges you to. Historically speaking, you should loosen up, study less and go out more. You tried leaving the breakfast dishes out once, living down to expectations. Fifteen minutes later the dishwasher was running and the sponge was wrung out on the side of the sink. She laughed until she got a cramp in her stomach. Now you feel like that cup, shards poking through your skin, but she's the one falling apart inside.

You aren't even there when it happens. You're in the library, your mind half on her and half on subatomic particles. When her phone rings you abandon your computer and start running for the car, but she's gone by the time you get there. Her parents hug you; the body's already been taken away. The nurses smile sympathetically and find you a box to pack her things in. Your things again, you think dully. At home you put everything away neatly, the books on your shelf and the clothes in your drawer. The puppy sits on your pillow. There isn't any funeral. At her wake you find nothing to say. You join her parents in sprinkling her over a hillside; they offered you the little box of ashes, but you said she'd like it better this way. Keeping dead lovers on the mantelpiece wouldn't be your style even if you had a mantelpiece. As it is, she would have had to settle for the kitchen window and a view of the next building. Instead you keep a little vase there filled with dandelions, and her ball of yarn. And some mornings, you forget to make the bed.