

*IT WAS A PLACE FOR SCREAMING, but she had no mouth. No mouth, no body, no physical form of any kind. She was adrift without form or substance in a boundless void, a vast gray sameness that seemed infinite. How long she'd been there, she didn't know. Forever, perhaps. Time was a meaningless concept in that eternal nothingness.*

*Maybe she was dead and the void was purgatory. If so, she had no memory of the sins she was there to atone for. But she knew suffering—soul-crushing loneliness and unrelenting boredom were always with her. Sleep provided an escape, if only temporarily. When she woke, she was still in the void, still trapped in a dream without end.*

*That had been the sum total of her existence, for countless sleep cycles of unknown duration at unknown intervals.*

*When the manifestations began, she rejoiced. Anything that broke the monotony was welcome. First to appear was a soft beep, as regular as a heartbeat. A white light began appearing, so brilliant it hurt, and then it would wink out. And of most interest to her, sometimes she heard people talking. She would listen closely, but their voices were indistinct, like faraway echoes. But they seemed closer each time she heard them, and her hope grew that she could find a way to communicate with them. She had questions to ask them, starting with, where was she? And of more importance, who was she?*

*She waited. There was no other option.*

The orderly entered the room pulling a cart behind him. He walked over to the basin and flicked on the light above it. The room had two beds, but only one was occupied. The patient, a young woman, was unconscious. She was intubated and catheterized, connected to an IV pump and a monitor that emitted a steady beep. The orderly stood beside her bed a moment. The brief visits with her had become the high point of his shift. Sometimes he'd talk to her, tell her how pretty she was. Even with all the tubes sticking out of her.

He turned away to attend to his routine tasks, glad that the room, his last that shift, would be quick to knock out. The sink needed a once-over, and the soap and towel dispensers refilling, and the waste basket emptied and relined—a sequence he carried out on automatic pilot, stealing occasional glances at the coma patient.

*Tough break, sweetie.*

In his fantasy, she would wake up and realize immediately that he was her soul mate, overlooking the fact that he was a good ten years older, overweight, and balding prematurely. As fantasies went, it was a good one.

Just as he was preparing to leave, he felt a sneeze coming on and reached for the box of tissues on top of the cart, inadvertently nudging an empty stainless steel pan with his elbow. The pan teetered on the edge of the cart for a breathless moment, then fell to the floor with a resounding crash that echoed off the walls, a ringing metallic cacophony. The orderly lunged for the pan, but the clangor subsided before he could get his hands on it. With any luck, they hadn't heard it at the nurse's station at the far end of the hall; he was in their crosshairs already for chronic lateness. Several tense minutes passed and no one came in to investigate, so he figured he was in the clear.

*Hope I didn't disturb your sleep, sweetie.*

He switched off the light over the basin and jockeyed the cart through the doorway, eager to punch out for the night and get the hell out of there.

The young woman in the bed stirred.

A powerful undertow was trying to pull her back down, but she fought her way upward, toward

the source of the sound and the light, afraid she wouldn't have enough strength to make it. But at last, like a swimmer breaking the surface of a dark sea, she was awake.

She moaned, but no sound came out, only a hollow wheezing through the tube in her throat. Without thinking, she grabbed it and yanked it out. A long, thin tube in her nose came out with it. She gagged and coughed, then lay panting with exhaustion. After a while she felt strong enough to raise her head and take stock of her surroundings.