

## West Nile Delirium

I watch my mother breathe, her collarbones blooming and wilting in the hospital air. I can almost see her hot breath collecting in thin wisps of broken melody inside the plastic tube through her mouth. She's singing in her dreams, I'm sure of it. Voice loud enough to fill the vast, Ugandan sky with tales of the peanut-butter pancakes and cherry-lemonade of back home.

"Excuse me, Miss," Says a voice, the nurse's. I scoot my stool back, and watch as she shifts my mother. Her hands are gentle as they brush against the folds, with long fingers that taper out at the end. For a moment, I want to tell her that she could have been a hand model. But that would have been stupid. They probably don't even have hand models in Uganda. She starts to leave, but I stop her.

"And sorry, one more thing," I say.

The woman looks at me, face drooping. She's tired; I can see it in her brows, which furrow slightly into a singular expression of pure exhaustion. And of this singularity, everyone seems to wear it. Old women who sell papaya at the market, men who walk home, barefoot, on the red-dusted roads with machetes slung over their backs. Even small children who wait in line to pump water from the village well into clay jugs. It is as if God has presented everyone with a shirt, each a different color but made from the same material, and said, "This is your future. Wear it without question."

"Do you think you maybe know anything about when my mother will wake up?" I ask, trying to keep from sounding hopeful. If it's possible, her features seem to droop even more, and the only thing keeping her face from sliding off entirely is the pitying smile on her lips.

"I am not a doctor. But I think your mama will be good in a little while." The nurse shrugs, palms turned up towards me. Her palms are different from backs of her hands, pale pink

with dark threads running through, and raised calluses. They rise up in mounds like lumps of hardened honey, flaking at the corners. It's funny how two sides of the same thing can be so different.

I remember on a particularly hot night of mosquitoes and sweat-soaked pajamas, I asked my mother why we had to come here, when we had everything back in the States. I was thinking then, about built-in air conditioners, nights without mosquito nets scratching my cheeks, the material trailing on and on like some hideous, wedding dress train.

She was quiet for a while. "But we didn't have everything."

I wanted to scream at her that *I* did, that she should have thought about me too. But she looked so young and old and small at the same time, thin arms hugging her naked knees. And somehow, I couldn't say those things.

My mother gave out a sigh, one of those small ones that meant she was about to say something big. I hated those sighs.

"Kyra," She said, "I know you don't agree, but please try and understand that this job is something very important to me. God will make sure everything works out in the end, I promise." Her words made me think about how alive her eyes were when she sang verses of the Bible in front of open fires to mesmerized children. There was usually someone beside her, tapping the rhythm out on an entenga drum. The children would get up out of their seats, swinging their hips and clapping their hands to the music. And long after the songs were over, I sometimes still heard singing those same verses. Voices sweet and accented, eyes alight with flames like the thick orange skirts of Irongo dancers.

I stare at my mother resting, and see the locket around her neck. It has tiny silver threads of paint peeling back in half-curls and thin dents disfiguring its smooth curves. She's always telling me vague answers when I ask her why she insists on wearing such a cheap thing.

"Because it's a gift." My mother would say every time, even when I tried to spring the question on her at unsuspecting moments.

"From who?"

"Someone you don't know."

I think about opening it, and I imagine seeing a photo, someone from her past maybe.

Before I know it, I'm lifting my hand-

And reaching further-

My fingers almost touching-

But they just hover there, suddenly unsure. My mother's skin is glowing, a thin sheen of perspiration like melted butter on her smooth, cinnamon skin. She's beautiful in this light, and taking her locket seems wrong.

I take it anyways, remembering that she might never wake up, unclasping the hook behind her warm neck and slipping it into the pocket of my dress.

Uncle Alex picks me up from the hospital in a boxy car borrowed from the compound. It rolls down the dirt road on misshapen tires, looking like something a child would have made if given rusting pieces of metal and a dirty white canvas.

It grunts to a stop in front of me, clouds of dirt unfurling from under the wheels in puffy tendrils. For a moment, the dying sun seems slathered in a translucent layer of molasses. But the dust clears, and I can see him through the glassless windows, head almost touching the canvas roof. He motions for me to get in, and I do. The seat belt is frayed and almost completely useless.

Uncle Alex clears his throat. "So, how is she? Your mom?"

He's not really my uncle. My mother just makes me call all the men here "Uncle" and the women "Aunt", like she's trying to get me to think of everyone as family. It's stupid, really, and I usually don't listen to her. But Uncle Alex is an exception. The title seems to fit somehow.

"She's the same as yesterday. And the day before that. No one's really sure when she'll wake up." I say.

"Oh." He answers. And then after a pause, "I'm sorry."

I glance at him. His eyes are guilty. After all, he was the one who'd been with my mother the day she'd been bitten by the mosquito carrying West Nile Virus. The one who had driven her to the hospital, but had come back alone.

We ride the rest of the way back in silence, but I like it. The quiet is calming-not like the loudness of the other missionaries, who manage to praise god and offer condolences at the same time. Their voices are too bright and stridently thick. I watch the sun set through the window, becoming smaller and whiter until the gaps in the sky are streaked with pink-violet and indigo.

It's only back in the safety of my own room that I dare take the locket out from my pocket. I plop down on my bed and hold it up under the light. It's larger than most lockets, circular, with a pattern of almost random lines. However, when I look closer, I can make out a tiny cross in the center.

The locket seems to pulse slightly in my hands, gleaming dimly in the buttery lamp light. I feel like I'm holding a piece of mother, and in a way I guess I am. I dig my fingernails into the crack of the locket, and pull in opposite directions. There's a moment of anticipation before I open it, a reel of possible faces playing across my eyelids.

But it's not a picture that stares back at me.

At first glance, the locket seems empty. But when I look closer, there are dents disturbing the inside surface; like ripples sliding across silver mercury.

They make only three words.

*Come find me.*

That night I dream of my mother, of her and me playing the card game Egyptian rat screw on the porch of our home in Minnesota. I am nine again, and she is teaching me how to play for the first time.

"The point of this game is get the entire deck, by slapping certain combinations of cards. You have to be quick though, or someone else might slap it first." She says, after giving half the pile to me. I watch her hands as they shuffle the cards, making each rectangle float and sink dizzily. The oriental swirls on the backs look like snakes. They writhe in blue and white curves, hissing softly like an intake of breath through closed teeth.

"One of the combinations you want to slap is a marriage. It's when a king and a queen are right next to each other, like this." My mother flips over the first two cards from her deck; a queen of diamonds and a king of hearts.

"What happens if something gets between them?" I ask, "Like for example...this ace." I insert an ace of spades between the king and the queen.

“Well then it’s not a marriage anymore, so you can’t slap it.”

“Oh.” I say, frowning. “That’s not fair.”

She laughs at me, throwing her head back on the wicker chair. Her Adam’s apple shivers with each raspy breath. “I’ll think you’ll find sometimes, that this game can be very unfair, and very complicated. Which is why I’m not telling you all the rules right away.”

I glare at her. “Just tell me. I can handle it.”

My mother smiles at me, a little sadly. She lifts her arm and shakes it. And from the depths of her sleeve come layer after layer of playing cards, coating everything in hissing squares of blue and white.