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Ready

Randall and I entered the shiny, spacious Mission One Health Lab waiting room, and hung our jackets and respirators at the rack. I changed my mind, though, when I saw all the other applicants waiting. I decided to keep my jacket on, and pushed my hands forward in the pockets to disguise my belly as we found our seats. I wasn't far enough along yet to be obviously pregnant, so (despite Randall's shrugs otherwise) it looked like weight gain. Or worse, maybe someone *would* know I was pregnant, and this perceptive person, probably a PhD in Child Development and/or the actual author of one of the parenting books I'd yet to read any of, would also be able to tell that I still hadn't felt the baby move at all, and that I was just generally being pregnant wrong. I knew I shouldn't care what anyone else thought, but I figured I might be embarking on the next major leap forward in human civilization with some of these people, and I felt a little self-conscious.

A touchscreen attached to my chair demanded attention with a health form. The series of flags and languages onscreen began with the USA and English, with the rest in alphabetical order. Curious, I explored the list, and was impressed by the range. I scrolled past Arabic, Korean, Swahili, Swedish. I stopped. Swedish? I tapped the flag: a gold sideways cross, traversing an ocean-blue background.

My mother had forced upon me the little she'd herself known of our ancestral tongue when I was younger. "Otherwise," she'd said, dripping with disapproval I could only later identify as projection, "your great-great-grandmother wouldn't even recognize you as Swedish." After years of rebellion and disregard toward it, I was hoping to resurrect my second vocabulary, at least to whatever its previous level had been, and pass it down to our child someday. If we were going to uproot, I figured, maybe I should connect to those roots, while I still could.

My ego fluttered when I was able to pick out a few easy words from the first screen ("Människor" means "people." "Hälsa" means "health."). In the tablet's Helvetica, the pairs of square dots looked like Mario blocks hovering exotically above the "a" letters, awarding me coins of heritage preservation as I read by. But my paper-thin resilience failed moments into encountering a stream of unfamiliar words on the next screen, and with a blush I resorted to an online translator.

"Rymdskepp." Spacecraft.

"Bosättare." Settlers.

"En resa på ett hundra år." A journey of a hundred years.

And one I suspected but wanted to check: "Ny planet." New planet.

I repeated the words mentally, trying to trick my brain into learning them. In a whisper, I practiced the three extra vowels, "å, ä, ö," (which sounded more like "i, o, u" when my vocal cords attempted them) until I noticed Randall's smirk at my struggling lips and furrowed brow. I gave him some side-eye, changed the tablet to English, and swept to the next page, entitled, "What You and Your Family Need to Know About Suspended Animation so You'll All Be Ready."

A normal person would have simply read on, but I stopped in my tracks as a song from my adolescence crashed in, uninvited. I couldn't help but remember the music video with the boys of DC Talk singing "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," a song about the rapture happening suddenly, causing all the children who didn't get taken to heaven to go hungry, get trampled on the floor, and die. "You've been left behind," the singers finished in a warning lament.

I'd listened to just about all their songs back then, not only because I'd had a crush on the cute, kind of androgynous long-haired one, but also because Christian music was all I was

allowed to listen to anyway. Along with giving me futile lessons in pronouncing the sj-sound (sometimes an "sh" and sometimes an "h," but basically impossible to know which), my mother had driven me to church every Sunday morning and Wednesday night. Once perpetual anxiety had kicked in about me or my friends disappearing in the rapture or going to hell at any moment, unwanted language and unwanted religion tangled into a single, conflated mental monster. I'd made use of the only tools of resistance within reach at that age: a slammable bedroom door, a pair of headphones, and smuggled-in *secular* (gasp) CDs.

"What if," I whispered to Randall, "after we leave, they build a *second* spaceship, one that goes like one percent faster than ours does, and my mother applies and gets a spot on *that* one? Is she going to *be there when we arrive*?" I asked, heart racing.

"Well," he shifted in his seat, "I don't think that'll happen. In all likelihood, we'll be a few lightyears away from your mother the rest of our lives. She won't be able to tell you what to do anymore. Don't worry."

"A few *lightyears*? You think that will matter?" I hissed. "Have you even *met* my mother?"

A lab assistant eventually called our names and guided us to a cool-lit room. Two chairs leaned back, more like the chairs in a dentist's office than those in a spaceship. No pods to be seen, I noted. The movies always had pods.

The assistant's nails tapped lightly on her tablet. "Dr. Frankels will be here in three minutes and twenty-four seconds," she said, and left the room.

I began the three minutes and twenty-four seconds by looking at a presumably old photo hung on the wall, of a waving scuba diver next to the still-colorful Great Barrier Reef--something

that was once worth donning a suit, goggles, fins, and a tank, and venturing far below the surface to experience.

I checked the time on my phone, with its old background photo of Randall and me at our wedding five years ago. We stood with straight backs above a golden beach, peering oh-so-boldly out a window at the red afternoon sun over the waves. This, of course, was before the rises in rent, before the stagnation of our retail and call center jobs. The nights still spent cuddling, sharing stories of childhood. Still colorful, still worth the dive.

I reminded myself to change that photo later.

The door clicked open, right on time, and a woman my mother's age entered. After some swaggering small talk, which apparently even doctors in this frontier discipline of medicine trade in, she looked at my belly. "My notes say nineteen weeks?"

I nodded.

"Perfect," she said. "And you'll still be at nineteen when the trial is over." She closed her notebook. "So what's going to happen now is that we'll give you both general anesthesia right here, then I'll have my assistants transport you to the pods for the trial dormancy." (I smirked. Pods. I knew it!) "While inside, all your bodily functions will be completely suspended and closely monitored. In one hundred sixty-five hours, almost a week, we'll transport you back to this room, and then wake you up here."

The doctor swung some mouthpieces, smelling of sanitizer, down from the ceiling and handed them to us. "Put these over your mouth and nose, please. Take deep, indoor breaths, and start counting backwards from one hundred."

As the mouthpiece reached my face, I was briefly visited by the Ghost of Irrelevant Competition who compelled me to try and make it down to a lower number than Randall.

One hundred. My muffled voice buzzed behind my ears. The hum of the room's air purifier blurred into nothing.

Ninety-nine. I realized I was glad we would never even see the pods. The moment I'd been most afraid of had been that moment in every science fiction movie when the glass case sealed shut, with me inside. No matter how fast the suspended animation process kicked in, I'd have enough time to pound the glass with my palm. "I'm not ready and I want out!" I would scream, thick glass numbing the sound to the outside world.

Ninety-eight. I pushed my tongue against the backs of my teeth, and felt only a dull pressure in my gums. My head stirred, as if I was trying to stand up too fast.

Ninety-seven. What did panic do to the brain, anyway? Would some weird neurons release a bunch of nasty chemicals that would soak and freeze into my head for a hundred sixty-whatever hours, making my brain a fear-flavored slushie by the end of it?

Ninety-six. I began to let most of existence stream past, like I was now only able to grab bits of reality here and there from I Love Lucy's too-fast conveyor belt of candies. Sounds and light dimmed.

Ninety-five. What about the baby? Was I just a sucker for the "golden sun and breezes of fresh air" ads, putting my baby through hell on my behalf? Maybe my body would betray me during this screening, and Dr. Frankels would wake me up early and say, "I'm sorry, we only allow mothers who know what the hell they're doing on this voyage. You've been left behind."

Ninety-five. Or did I already do that number?

I'd assumed that I would feel frozen in time. Instead, the feeling was more like *time* was frozen in *me*. The thin rootlets that started in my chest and ventured far in secret directions,

previously only ever traceable to me in the right moonlight, now thickened. They reached for nourishment and support, and drew related spirits into a tightening crystal pattern around me.

Below me, a young woman with long blond hair dragged a heavy wooden chest that she and her mother had packed full of the wool, paper, leather, and metal that made up an eighteen-year-old's life in the birch forests and potato farms of Småland, onto an overpriced, overbooked steamship from Göteborg. The bruise on her upper left arm throbbed with the memory of her employer spitting the word "*piga*" at her, on her final night working at his estate. But she focused instead on what she'd read in an issue of *Östgöten*: that you could scrape gold from the streets in America.

She was seasick most of the trip, but nibbled dry sourdough bread when she could, trying to summon the fading scents of her springtime forest walks and family meals above the salty waves invading the hull. On the inside cover of her Bible spread her family tree, with the scribbled address of a cousin in Andersonville beside it. Once she arrived there, she slept in the basement pantry with the potatoes and onions until she found a domestic job for a Prairie Avenue family who didn't hit her. Three years later, she married a fellow Swede from the Lutheran church. He butchered cattle at the Yards, and each night he would return with a small wage and the iron smell of drained blood.

I heard panting breaths from above, and shifted my attention to a young woman with tangled brown hair, flinging water into her eyes at her apartment sink. A gold LED glowed under the skin near her right eye, which swelled red with irritation. Coughing and dripping with sweat and snot, she and her partner rushed out of their tear gas-coated clothes, revealing a floating, ghostlike left hand connected to her shoulder only by a translucent arm of dark matter. They dropped the contaminated clothes onto the floor, next to a discarded first draft of her cardboard

protest sign, the attempt where she had written in too-large letters and run out of space. She'd drawn an upside-down Mission One logo, and had written underneath it:

ONE GIANT LEAP FOR A MAN

ONE SMALL STEP FOR MANKI

A text message warned that the police were starting to arrest people who had been at the Square. The young woman and her partner threw on new clothes, stuffed essentials into some old luggage used by their parents on the voyage, and hurried downstairs and outside. She used an encrypted map in her eyepiece to flee down the graffitied alleys and avoid surveillance, guiding them outside the city. That night, surrounded by young teak trees learning to take root in the ferric red soil, she slept on her back. She looked for the tiny Old Sun between the dark clouds, hoping for a glimpse before the next daylight seized power, and squeezed her partner's hand.

Finally, the forgotten smell of Fruit Stripe gum turned my attention to my left. A woman in her thirties checked the rearview mirror of the two-door sedan that was all hers now, after what the divorce lawyers had called "equitable distribution." In the backseat, her daughter fought with the seatbelt and her Sunday-best dress, the pale pink one that matched the child-sized respirator on her lap. The stick of gum was her reward for being ready on time.

The woman drove past maples with summer leaves turned red by ozone, until they reached the Covenant Church. Inside, feet dangling from a pew, her daughter worried about the difference to God between grape juice, wine, and blood in terms of valid entry through the golden gates of heaven. She wondered if the way a family was when its members went to heaven was the way it stayed forever, or if it ever went back to how it used to be.

The constellation of these lives folded toward me. I realized how clear, how *recognizable* they were, and I tried to reach into the shrinking space between them before it closed. Maybe I could stitch the converging shapes together with intention.

But I was too late. The crystallization finished, and my chance fell away. Next time, I resolved, I would be ready.

I started to experience fractions of moments again.

My heartbeat rumbled behind my eardrums. My foot brushed against a cold floor. A human voice said words I *could* understand if I could focus on them. My organs staggered around in confusion, as if meeting each other for the first time, threatening to vomit. My social judgment safeguards weren't back in formation yet; but if the pregnant woman was going to vomit coming out of suspended animation, fine.

"Welcome back," a woman's voice invaded. I resisted the reality in her words and kept my eyes shut, hoping to keep my dream intact. But a warm light shined against my eyelids, tiny proteins floated across my retinas in the gold glow, and I edged my eyes open. The familiar doctor's office, housing my hope for a caring and competent world, fought along thousands of tiny boundaries with a mythical version of itself. I breathed in, deeper each time. This single world, containing everything from the corrupted air outside, to Randall's bloodshot eyes and deflated slouch, to the limitless hopeful planets wandering beyond, is where my child and I would bleed and dream.

Once I'd fully awakened and come back from the dramatics to my normal self, we passed our medical checks and returned straight home. The first thing I wanted was a nap, because it turns out that shroomy out-of-body experiences and suspended animation are hella tiring.

But when I shuffled back to our bedroom, packed cardboard boxes covered the whole bed. A heavy box held the same folded baby crib I had once used. The head of my little red Dala horse peeked out from a box of wall decorations.

This, I thought. This was the work of my mother.

We hadn't asked her to pack anything, and I'd never wanted her to; we had finite luggage space and there was no way we could bring all of this with us. So I set myself to the wearily familiar task of unpacking her work and repacking.

I peered inside a box of books. I probably didn't need to bring the *Left Behind* paperbacks to the next solar system, so I removed those. One black leather book had no title on the spine, and I pulled it out. Everything on top of it noisily shifted, and I heard creaking footsteps approach from the next room in response.

I opened the book, and impossibly thin pages flopped apart, covered in tiny Swedish words.

"You should take it," my mother said, leaning with crossed arms in the doorway. "I know you don't believe in a word in it, but you should take it anyway."

So we were back to *that* argument. The familiar emotional muscles tensed and my breath quickened. Her words prowled around the room for an opening to poke me or stowaway in the boxes. I glanced at the doorknob. But this time, I channeled the winding paths of the tree roots I'd seen, and I felt grounded in place.

I checked the book's inside covers, front and back. A faint script had connected names of deceased family, narrated directions to a destination long since vanished, and written a short note. I pulled up the online translator again.

"Vart du än är." Wherever you are.

"Jag önskar dig hopp." I wish you hope.

"Jag kommer alltid att känna dig för din kärlek." I will always know you by your love.

I carefully planted the book back inside the box, sharing a glow with it that cleared away the lurking dust. My mother left the room.

I climbed onto the bed and somehow found space between the boxes. I had to slide my left arm between baby clothes and family photos, and bent my knees around the books. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and suddenly felt an odd tumbling motion in my abdomen. Someone was finally ready to move. A tear seeped through my closed eye, and I smiled.