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Kitty drove me to the hospital at two in the morning. I sat in the back seat so that I could lie down if I wanted to. I didn't put on my seat belt because I didn't like the way it pinched me around the middle. I had a blanket pulled around me, tented around my shoulders, and the blue fuzz from the blanket kept snagging on my facial stubble. I hadn't shaved in two days and Kitty said that my face was growing Velcro. Everything stuck to it. Blankets, socks, bits of lint and tissue.

I had not been outside in weeks so I stared curiously out of the car window at the streets and buildings passing by. I felt like a ghost, white-faced, looking at a world I used to belong to. The people were so far away that they didn't bother me. They were like people on a fuzzy black-and-white TV screen. I was surprised at how crowded the streets were, how many people were out in the middle of the night, walking in groups, flagging down taxis, even some of them still working.

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I saw a pizza deliveryman with six boxes of pizza strapped to the back of his bicycle. All of a sudden I could taste pepperoni, and I had a longing for pizza.

I saw a construction crew in yellow boots working on a hole in the street with blazing bright electric lights shining down on them. The lights were so bright that they sent a pain stabbing through my head as we passed, and I cringed and closed my eyes.

“Sorry about that,” Kitty said. “Sorry, I couldn’t help that.”

Kitty was a nervous person. She was a flibbertigibbet. Professionally she was an art critic, but personally she was a flibbertigibbet. Even before I got sick, she was always in a flutter. Every word she said sounded like a reflex jerked out of her. As she drove, her head turned nervously from side to side and I could see two cords standing out on the back of her neck. She made little clicking, muttering noises to herself about the other drivers or about the way to the hospital. She was always narrating her life under her breath.

When we reached the hospital we had to stop on the ramp leading to the parking garage while a security guard checked us over. Kitty opened the window on her side and looked up at him out of her frizz of blond hair that always looked like an electric halo

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around her face, and the guard leaned close and peered tiredly down at her. He had a flashlight in his hand but he didn't shine it in at us. He had a little fragment of potato chip stuck to his lip.

A wave of cold struck into the car through the open window and I hated that guard. Couldn't he see there was a patient in the back seat? I shrank into the blanket and glared at him. It was probably warm out; it was spring, late April, and the people on the streets were dressed in light jackets; but I was too sick to appreciate the spring air.

The guard didn't say anything. After a moment of peering into the car he started chewing his mouthful of potato chips again, nodded tiredly, and waved us through with his flashlight. Kitty closed the window and nosed up the ramp into the parking garage.

We found a spot on the first level only a few yards from the hospital entrance. Kitty got out, opened the car door on my side, and an oily reek surrounded me and stuck in my throat.

"Are you ready?" she said anxiously. "Can you walk okay? How's your feet? Do you want to lean on me? It's not far. It's just to the door there, see, it'll take half a minute, is that okay? Are you okay?"

Ever since I had gotten sick I had more or less stopped talking. It cost too much energy to marshal up the words. Kitty usually tried to keep up a stream of anxious chatter to fill in the silence.

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She helped me out of the car and I stood with the blanket wrapped tightly around my shoulders. My legs and feet were icy cold below the cuffs of my jeans. I was barefoot; I couldn't wear shoes. My feet had sores on them where the skin had pulled too tight over the bones.

"You can do it," Kitty said, leading me toward the glass door, her shoes scraping and clattering on the cement, echoing in the nighttime quiet. "It's only a few steps." We walked slowly, her arm around me. When we reached the door it slid open automatically. Inside, the bright light made me cringe as if somebody had hit me in the face. The air was dry, sterile, colder than the outside air, and the floor was like polished ice on my damaged feet. We were in a narrow room with a row of pink plastic chairs along one wall and a welcome desk at the other end.

The receptionist got up from behind the desk and came toward us. He was about my height but much fatter. I was so used to looking at Kitty or at myself in a mirror that I had forgotten how fleshy other people generally were. He had a fatuous smile on his white fleshy face. His two plump hands were clasped together like lumps of dough. He was wearing blue hospital scrubs, white new sneakers, and a white coat with a nametag. His name was Earl.

"And which one of you is sick today?" he said.

He probably meant it innocently, and maybe he

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said it to every couple that came in the door. But Kitty gave a nervous gasp and stepped back, staring at him with her eyes open in an astonished outrage. She was anorexic and looked almost as wasted and sick as I did. She didn't like to be reminded of it and was shocked when anyone mentioned it to her.

"My husband," she said, stiffly, "is here to see Dr. Kack."

"Wonderful," the receptionist said, his smile undented. "But your husband can't come in without shoes. Didn't you bring shoes?"

"He doesn't wear shoes," Kitty said.

"He can't walk in here without shoes. We'll have to put him in slippers."

"No," Kitty said, glancing at me nervously. "He doesn't wear anything on his feet. He can't. It hurts too much." She glared at the receptionist and I felt proud of her. Whatever trouble we may have had in private, we kept up a united front in public. She was ready to do battle for me. A certain hysterical ferocity was taking shape in her expression, in her pinched face and pointed chin.

The receptionist smiled at her, then turned and smiled at me, and then suddenly said, "Wonderful, we'll find a wheelchair and he can put his feet up on the footrests. We can't have bare feet treading over the hospital floors."

"Thank you," Kitty said, shrilly, with dislike in her

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voice. “That will be fine. Can you take us to see Dr. Kack? He knows that we’re coming. I called him half an hour ago.”

She was furious now, because Dr. Kack had warned us to keep the visit a strict secret and in her usual manner she had blown the secret already.