

Songbird

*a novelette by
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A darkness met Meredith at the doorway into room 307, as if she'd stepped out into some sprouting field in the middle of nowhere in the middle of an overcast night. "Phoebe?" she whispered into the room. "I'm going to turn a light on now."

"You'll wake it up."

"This won't wake your baby. I promise." Meredith activated her tablet's soft light. The Vita-Crib's interface glowed for a moment: all readings within normal parameters. Inside, the baby slept swaddled in a blue blanket; he grunted.

"I told you. It's waking up."

"Newborns make all kinds of noises in their sleep. He's fine."

"No, it's not," Phoebe shouted.

The baby screamed. Meredith lifted him and held him to her chest in what the head nurse tech called the "optimal comforting position." She walked a quick circle, which settled him. So long since she'd held a baby, or had to. The head nurse tech had asked her to cover for one of the other techs who usually checked the babies. Her first year, she'd been told, she'd just check on the mothers, the easy cases. Mothers usually had someone to hand their babies off to while she checked for any signs that they weren't recovering from labor as they should. "You want to hold him?"

Phoebe sat up, her mouth forming some foreign vowel. Her gown fell open. Her baby screamed again. She kept her eyes on the door.

"I'm walking," Meredith whispered. "We're walking, we're just fine." Her tablet signaled her to another room. She laid the quieted baby back in the crib, which rocked and played heartbeats. "Call me if you need anything."

"Warm, but impersonal." More of the head tech's words. Meredith maintained her impersonal warmth for her next half-dozen patients. Cooing at the slightest movements of newborns in their sleep. Marveling with parents of first-borns, later-borns. Reassuring mothers that no one gets the latch just right on the first try. And watching each mother holding her baby as if she could draw back into herself some part of that being they were together for those brief months. They glowed. And Meredith, warmly and impersonally, glowed back at them.

"You should hold him," Meredith said to Phoebe as she wrapped the blood pressure cuff around her arm. "He'd settle in more easily." Phoebe must have fixed her gown herself: strings half-tied, half-tangled, one sleeve slung limply over her arm. Meredith worked by the dim lights of her tablet and the blood pressure machine.

"I should stay over here." Phoebe tugged at the cuff. "That's what I should do."

"Please, let me straighten this." Meredith adjusted the band, and the machine inflated the cuff and after a few moments chirped its completion. "Normal pressure. Temperature?" She held the thermometer's wand with its plastic cover up to Phoebe's mouth. "Open?"

"You got a lot of people telling you what you should do too?" Phoebe clenched her mouth before opening it wide, like a chick.

“Close. Getting told what to do is part of being a new mom, isn’t it?” She slipped the thermometer out of Phoebe’s mouth. “No fever.”

Phoebe fluttered in her bed. “You got kids, then?”

If there had been a window in the room, Meredith would have opened the curtains around it. Interior rooms were for charity cases, flight risks, women who weren’t well enough to look out at the constant glow of the street lights. “Not yet. Not ever, maybe. I’m not sure.”

“I’m not sure either.” Phoebe looked over at the Vita-Crib. “Should hold him, huh?”

“Just press this button if you need me for anything.”

Dr. Vargas stopped Meredith in the hallway. “Present for you.” She handed Meredith a worn paperback. “For passing your six-month review with ‘Exceeds Expectations.’” They’d made motions toward friendship after talking about a novel Meredith had been reading during her break. Meredith had avoided her since calling her Ana in front of the head nurse tech. “Use professional courtesies at all times.” More of his words.

On the inside cover, Dr. Vargas had signed the book: “Find happiness, find yourself. All the best, Ana.” Meredith’s tablet flashed.

“Thank you, Dr. Vargas.”

The baby’s cries echoed in the hallway. Another tech had taken him to the nursery for his bottle. Phoebe still refused to nurse, though policy was to encourage all mothers to do so, even ones scheduled to see the adoption liaison. Meredith could see that on Phoebe’s chart now. They were all overworked, but someone should have noted that sooner. Phoebe sat upright, her hands rhythmically unraveling the braids which kept her hair around her head. Was she an Indweller? Meredith propped a pillow behind her. Phoebe didn’t lean back against it. The loose hair, blonde and softly curled, dropped to her lap.

“You don’t have anyone to come see you?” “I don’t like the light.”

“No aunts or cousins?” Meredith had seen Indweller women on the ward only twice before. Both had been emergency c-sections, one for preeclampsia, another for a mother who wasn’t progressing. And both were there with dozens of other women, their singing and praying whispering through the hallway from the waiting room and later, after delivery, from the mothers’ bedsides.

“Adoption lady should have come by now,” Phoebe said. “Come to get it.” She pulled her sheet around herself, covering the ends of her hair.

“The adoption liaison?”

“Adoption lady said I wouldn’t have to see the baby none if I didn’t want to.” “I’ll ask the head nurse tech to check on her.” Meredith smoothed the Vita-Crib’s bedding pad, still warm from the tiny body that had pressed against it.

“It’s pretty, that baby is. Somebody good will want it.” Phoebe shook her head, then looked up at Meredith. “What’s it like to have short hair?”

Ana—Dr. Vargas—kept her long hair pinned just above the collar of her white coat. She sat alone at one of the long tables in the staff cafeteria, her coat's shoulders rising and falling in odd jerks as she ate. Meredith stood behind her for a moment: warm but impersonal for a nurse tech meant not smoothing the badly fitting coat over the doctor's shoulders. She gripped the tray in both hands tighter and walked to the other side of the table.

"May I?" Meredith gestured to the table with her head. A few strands of her hair had escaped from her tech's cap, meant to fit over close-cropped hair.

Dr. Vargas looked up and around the room. She tapped the screen of her tablet a couple times. "I suppose that would be fine," she said. "Provided we talk about medical matters here. Medical school. Patients."

"Patients? Aren't we supposed to discuss patient matters in room only?"

"Sit," Dr. Vargas said. Meredith lowered herself slowly onto the seat across from Dr. Vargas. Slowly, stiffly. "I mean, patients, in general. Don't you ever make up stories about them? Especially the ones that don't seem to have much of a story?"

"I think that would be against protocol." Meredith peeled the thick pith from her orange. "And what if I couldn't remember what I'd read in the charts and what I'd daydreamed?"

"You get to spend time with them." Dr. Vargas pushed an orange segment around in salad dressing with her fork. "I spend time, what little I have, with their wounds. Remember that when you're in medical school."

"You think about them as wounds?"

"Episiotomy incisions, cesarean incisions, yes I do. Sometimes you have to wound people to give them what they want." She wiped her hands with a torn, stained napkin. "You're so young, maybe that sounds broken."

Meredith looked past Dr. Vargas to the others filing into the cafeteria: men, mostly young, mostly from working-class families that lived on the lower floors of the buildings surrounding them. The type of men that her father, an engineer, had told her had once worked in factories. Strange what they make now, these nurse techs, swaddling babies in overfull maternity wards. "I don't think I could make up stories about the mothers. Maybe the children. Maybe I could imagine what they'll be. I don't know."

"One from another." Across the room, a tray clattered. A janitor sprayed orange-oil cleaner on the table behind Meredith. Orange oil: that smell that followed her around the hospital. "Babies, incisions."

"But you don't have either."

"Maybe you can make up a story about that," Dr. Vargas said. She had looked up from her empty tray, past, Meredith imagined, the janitor and rush of staff. "What do you think I do around here? Really?"

"I don't know."

"That's a start."

"And the rain, it don't come down at home like it comes down out here, I don't think." Phoebe had moved the Vita-Crib at an angle to her bed, as if she were trying to memorize her

baby's feet rising and falling together against the swaddle. "Don't sound like it does, anyway. You ever have to walk home in the rain? Can't imagine you live in the hospital."

"No, I don't live in the hospital," Meredith said. The blood pressure machine chirped, and she unwound the cuff from Phoebe's arm.

"You ever think that sounds like a bird, that thing?" Meredith shook her head and inserted the thermometer into Phoebe's round mouth. "I suppose you don't have a name picked out. Just a temporary one. For your baby." He slept in the Vita-Crib, each swing bringing him almost too near Phoebe's bed. "For the chart." Meredith heard herself clipping her voice like Dr. Vargas did—when had she started doing that?

Phoebe shrugged. She pushed the thermometer out with her tongue. "A momma don't just give a baby a name."

"Who picked out your name?"

"It's not Phoebe," she said. "Not really. Momma and Daddy didn't want me to come here under my real name. They don't want my real name on his birth records. I just come here to have the baby. And I come to give him up. And you know, the forgetting thing." She pointed to her head.

The forgetting thing. Meredith had heard rumors about procedures on women who'd had traumatic deliveries or worse, but who would want to forget their healthy baby? She picked him up, tried to feel the weight of him against her. "His father must have a name picked out for him."

"Jason won't ever know about the baby." Phoebe looked over to the empty swinging crib. "I told him I couldn't have no babies, that I didn't bleed like I was supposed to. Like I was one of them trees they chop down after it don't make no fruit."

"He wouldn't marry you? After?"

"Jason's not one of us." Phoebe pointed to her head again. "We weren't ever going to be able to get married. He was one of the out-workers, just in for the orange harvest. I liked him. He said I was too pretty to chop down like a bad tree. I told him to come back after the lights shut off. Like that for weeks, we were. He don't know he got a son. He's pretty, too. Like the baby. Adoption lady should have come got him. For outside. He's so pretty, that baby."

Meredith placed the baby back in the Vita-Crib. "Yes, he is."

"Is outside pretty too?"

Meredith tried not to think of the outside world. Not outside this job, outside this building. This job was hers to do, at least for the rest of the school year. She tried not to think of her high school friends now in their first year of college, where she should have been. If she had passed her graduation exam, like they'd done. Meredith would have passed the test easily—it was a formality, really, her teachers had said, especially for someone as smart as Meredith.

It should have been a formality. Which is why she'd taken the exam after falling on the stairs in her building. She'd hit her head, but that didn't seem to bother her as much as the pain in her leg, which had twisted when she'd landed. Did that matter? If she took the makeup

exam, offered later in the month, then she'd miss out on scholarship opportunities at the colleges she'd applied to. No, better to take the exam now. She could pass it, she told herself, in spite of the pain.

What she hadn't anticipated was the confusion that came over her. The way her thoughts slowed down. When she tried to read the questions, the words ran from her. She couldn't catch them. She couldn't catch the answers, which fuzzed out of focus. She put her aching head down, just for a moment. The proctor touched her shoulder. Meredith tried very hard not to vomit. "Are you okay?" he whispered. Meredith couldn't lift her head. An EMT team brought her out of the room. The proctor must have called them. Then, she woke up in the hospital. This hospital. Her dad held her hand. Her mom ran her hands over her hair. "There you are," she said. "We've had a scare, haven't we?"

After another nap, Meredith could focus better on her mom's words. "You have a concussion, darling. The doctor thinks you'll be fine in a few days."

Meredith tried to remember the thing that seemed very important to remember. She couldn't, though. Her dad kissed her forehead. "Sleep, my dear. You need lots of rest so you can get better."

After she did recover, fully, a few weeks later, her mom told her about her test score, about how she'd missed the makeup exam, about how she could take the test again next year. "Lots of young people take a gap year," her mom said. "No one will think anything of it, especially after you pass the test next spring."

One year. One year too many. She'd begun as a volunteer in the neurology ward where she'd recovered from her concussion. One of the nurses there told her they were hiring just about anyone for tech jobs in maternity. A way to fill a year.

So she'd applied. The head nurse tech only half-listened to Meredith's responses to his questions about why she'd wanted to be a nurse tech on the maternity ward. Didn't it all sound lofty enough, talking about learning on the ground for a year before she went off to college and possibly medical school after that. "College?" he'd said. "Not married?" Married and on the ward, he meant. Not something she'd imagined, but medical school wasn't something she'd imagined either. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit that she hadn't imagined much of anything, aside from passing the exam then going to college and majoring in something direct, exact. She hadn't imagined this: the days filled with taking mother's temperatures, blood pressures, stories.

Meredith adjusted the blood-pressure cuff around a mother's arm. Dr. Vargas slid past her then raised the mother's gown. "You can go home tomorrow morning," she said. "You're healing nicely. You'll feel better at home." The mother nodded, her baby just waking in its Vita-Crib at the sound of the blood-pressure machine's chirp.

"Do they?" Meredith stopped Dr. Vargas in the hallway. "Feel better at home?"

"I suppose so. Familiar bed, familiar food, and so on." Dr. Vargas tapped on her tablet. "It's what we say. It's what they expect us to say. Didn't you feel better once you got home?"

"That was different."

"I suppose so."

Meredith could have spent her break with the other off-duty techs, watching them streaming sports on their tablets. Instead, she opened her locker briefly to touch the novel wrapped in her rain jacket. “Going out?” one of the others asked her.

“No, just cold.” Meredith grabbed the sweater hanging on the back of her locker and quickly shut the door. Fifteen minutes, just enough time to walk up to Neurology, look out their banks of windows into the storm that pressed itself against the building.

How could they contain this? Years ago, her family had visited one of the Indwellers’ high-rise farms. The men gave tours of for a few dollars. Meredith remembered looking up through the trees, the fruit hard and small, nearly hidden. Something mechanical about the whole thing. Sprinkler heads jutting down from the gray ceiling, the soil somehow too spongy beneath her feet. Windows that should have shown the city below, but instead seemed to look out over an impossible green vastness. Somewhere above, somewhere below, other farms on other floors. She’d only had a vague sense then about the economics of the thing, the farms subsidized by someone’s sense of duty toward the people within or a sense of duty to their beliefs. And the smell of oranges pervading.

Something hard woke her from the bitter scent. She turned. The farm girls pitched dropped fruit at her back and laughed. They flew away once she saw them, flashes of gold hair and shadow darting back toward the squat cabins that ringed the trees.

Rain struck the windows on the neurology floor. “Pretty, isn’t it?” the tech at the reception desk said. He’d been at the desk when she’d been wheeled around as a patient, talking loudly into his tablet about his grandchildren’s exam results. “Pretty, even when you can’t see anything but gray.”

“I suppose so.”

“I do, too.” Dr. Hughes, her neurologist, stopped, stood beside her for a moment. Did he know she hadn’t heard him walk up to the window? “You’re feeling well, Meredith?”

She shifted, looking down. He couldn’t see her eyes here, couldn’t check the reaction of her pupils, couldn’t see any sluggishness in their response. Not that she expected anything unusual. “Thank you. I should go.”

“Of course. Patients.”

“Patients.”

“I want to go out in the rain.” Phoebe had wrapped herself in her blanket, and the pills on its gray surface caught in her hair. “I can hear it.”

“You’ll have to wait for your doctor to discharge you.” Meredith tapped her tablet’s screen to confirm the machines’ readings. “You’ll have to stay in your room until then.”

“I won’t take the baby. I’ll leave him here.”

“That was your plan, wasn’t it?”

Phoebe let the blanket drop around her waist. She stood on the bed. “He was here a minute ago. Where do they take him?”

“To the nursery. They feed him, change him. They hold him, mostly.”

“Does he like that?”

A new message popped up on Meredith’s tablet. She should help Phoebe down first. The message insisted she read it, though. Neurology Department. She dismissed the message for later. “I haven’t held him in the nursery,” she said. “But in general, babies do better when they have contact with caregivers.”

“Better than what?” Phoebe fluttered down and slid beneath the blanket. She uncovered her head and blinked. “I should tell you about Jason. Before the forgetting thing. Maybe you can tell the baby’s new folks about him.”

Meredith stopped herself before asking the next question. Warm but impersonal. Asking why Jason’s consent for the adoption wasn’t needed would be personal. Either another man—presumably Phoebe’s husband—was listed on the birth certificate and had already signed off on the adoption, or no father would be listed at the husband’s request because the paternity could not be determined at the time of birth. And asking about that would be terribly personal, wouldn’t it? “I’ll ask the head tech about telling them.”

“You know how to find people on that thing?” Phoebe grabbed for Meredith’s tablet and missed. She pulled herself back onto the bed, swaddling herself with the blanket. “Like outside?”

“Do you want to find anyone in particular?”

“Reckon I could try to find Jason.” Phoebe looked at the wall where a window should have been. “Don’t think it would do any good now. And I’m gonna forget him anyway soon. Would be nice to have something of him. Like maybe I could remember him as just a nice young man who came in to pick oranges one season. That’s all.”

“You liked him.”

“I liked the way he laughed. I liked the way he held me, like he wasn’t afraid he was gonna break me. My husband holds me like I’m some sort of chick done fell out of a tree. Maybe he won’t do that no more now that I’ve had the baby.” Phoebe dropped the blanket on the bed and walked to the wall. She ran her fingertip over the gray paint, outlining something Meredith couldn’t know. “I liked the way he undid my hair when we, yeah, you know. I like the way he did that. My husband thinks its something not right, having my hair down. So, yeah, I liked Jason. I like Jason.”

“Timing, Meredith,” the head tech called out to her from his station in the hallway. “Did the patient require extra care?” Two of the other techs flanked him; one slid something beneath the counter. “Lots of other mothers waiting.”

Meredith shook her head and spun too quickly on her stiff knee. She wouldn’t let herself fall. For a few moments, she leaned against the wall, its gray paint echoing the walls in Phoebe’s room, and steadied herself, let the pain pass. Those gray walls, the stillness of the dried droplets like rain where it couldn’t have been. A window that wasn’t. A farm on top of a city, a farm on which rain fell at the convenience of those who ran it. “I wanted to make sure she didn’t require extra care.”

“Is that the neuro case?”

Meredith nodded. “No, I mean, she’s fine.”

The head tech waved her on. “Don’t go looking for something that’s not there, Meredith.”

“I’m just doing my job, sir.”

Even in the chaos of the other mothers’ rooms, Meredith found herself quiet. Curtains open to the rain, which was finally letting up, or curtains closed to the street lights. Slip the plastic cover over the thermometer, insert, check for fevers, flag anything abnormal for the nurses and doctors to review. Wrap cuffs around arms, plug in the machine to inflate the cuffs, confirm the readings, and flag when needed. Double-check the Vita-Crib readings, pause over sleeping babies, praise the sweetness of a curled hand, an opening face. Change bedding and bed angles and bed pans. Change the video streams and thermostats and lights.

The warm impersonal nature of the lights.

One patient, then another, then another.

And her locker too easily opened by a head tech with a master password.

And her rain jacket useless against all of it.

Each patient kept her from checking: the book, its contents, its inscription. A thing. Or, if they’d taken it, the memory of a thing. She’d pass other reviews, other hurdles over the course of a long year. Dr. Vargas would see that. And then the year would be gone. And then she’d be gone. She’d pass the exam—what the state tested didn’t seem to be all that much in the scope of everything she’d learned in high school, what she’d made herself learn—and then she’d be gone. Off to college. Off the ward.

She had an escape plan.

Even if they took the book.

“I’m glad you made it up here, Meredith.” Dr. Hughes opened the door to his office and guided her in. As he had done for her when she’d been his patient. As he would do for Phoebe, if she weren’t already on the maternity ward—would some other tech wheel her up, wheel her strapped to a chair and already drowsy with the sedative they’d use to begin the process? “I trust you’re doing well.”

Meredith nodded and let him lead her to one of the two chairs facing the outer edge of his desk. A nurse sat in the other seat, looking down at his tablet, the way her father looked through his, searching through his notes on her medications and therapies. “Do you?”

“Are you having any of your previous symptoms? Headaches, blurred vision?”

“Of course not,” Meredith said. She sat too quickly and caught herself on the arm of the chair. Her leg. That leg. Her tablet slipped onto the carpet. The nurse shifted and picked it up, handed it to her. “I could have done that. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Something clinical about his gaze, that pause for finding the crack. Something of her father, the unkempt eyebrows, the three lines between them. “You work on the maternity ward?”

“Taking blood pressures and temperatures. Changing beds. Just for the mothers. Just the healthier ones.” Meredith turned her tablet’s screen to her lap, pressed her fingertips into

its scratched plastic back. “I don’t work the critical births. And I don’t work with the babies so much. Nothing that fragile.”

Dr. Hughes handed Meredith a tablet with a file open onscreen. “We’ll get to know each other as a team soon enough,” he said. “I’m interested in one of your patients. Phoebe, I think she’s called herself during her delivery.” He glanced down at his own tablet. “Let’s see. Nineteen, no known health problems, no abnormalities during pregnancy, no abnormalities during delivery or after.”

She scrolled through the outlined steps of the process; he had highlighted the steps in which she would participate. How different would it be from what she’d done for Phoebe in her maternity ward room: monitor her blood pressure, take her temperature, keep watch for anything the nurses and doctors should know. In this process, she would just hold Phoebe’s hand until Phoebe became Leah again. “But why aren’t you using her name in her file?”

“Her name is Leah,” the nurse said. “Phoebe isn’t her real name.”

“Isn’t it? She just said it wasn’t the one her parents gave her.”

Dr. Hughes leaned back in his chair, toward the windows behind him, toward the rain still falling behind and beneath them. “Standard protocol, Meredith. If we don’t use the name she knew herself by during the incident, then the process might not work as effectively as we hope.”

“But she knew herself as Phoebe during her delivery,” Meredith said. The tablet’s screen saver flashed its odd orange glow once, then announced its provenance and ownership in orange block letters beneath her hovering fingers. “She was Phoebe by then, wasn’t she?”

“Good questions, Meredith. Star student questions.” As he recounted studies that addressed the efficacy of using real vs. assumed names during memory alterations, he faded into the sound of the rain and the sound of some buzzing that Meredith knew came from within her own auditory cortex, as he’d explained to her months ago. She pushed herself back into the sound of his voice, the uprisings, the pauses. “I’d understand if you told me you were too tired after your shift to assist,” he said. “But we don’t get to do this often. This is how careers start. When you don’t start them the usual ways.”

“Would it be a good question to ask why you’re doing this?”

“You’re having doubts? If you’re too tired, I can quite easily find someone else to assist. But you know the patient. She trusts you.” Dr. Hughes motioned to the window. “It’s late. Of course. You’re near the end of your shift.”

“I’m fine,” Meredith said as she stood. “I want to assist. I want to be here. I will be here.”

“Good.”

“Yes, good.”

Dr. Hughes shifted forward in his chair. “Leah’s—Phoebe’s—parents kept the pregnancy a secret to all but her husband. To the rest of her community, she’s been gravely ill, and she’s come to the hospital for treatment. Her condition, they said, was that dire. So, we’re just closing a loop. Leah will remember being ill for the past year, but she won’t recall her, as her parents put it, transgressions. She’ll be home, embraced by her community, who will see this as a miracle healing.”

“She’ll feel better at home, won’t she?”

“That’s right, Meredith. Good point.”

How careers start. Not by falling down a flight of stairs and missing the her chance to take the high school graduation exam the state enacted in lieu of any standards the fragmented schools had to follow. Not by failing to prove to colleges that in spite of her grades, in spite of her essays and writing samples and test scores, that she was a graduate of the Republic of Texas public school system. Not that many colleges would take her now. Even an excused failure meant that none but the for-profits would accept her. Unless she had a way in, a sponsor on faculty or a place on a research team. How careers start. By accidents of where she’d found herself. By accidents of whom she found herself with.

“I can’t, Meredith.” Dr. Vargas slipped past her into the hallway. A tech wheeled a mother into a room; another wheeled a baby in a Vita-Crib behind them. Quiet hours: no visitors, lights lowered in the hallway, lights lowered in the rooms. Doors closed or mostly closed. “She’s not my patient. I can’t tell you what you want to hear.”

“Was I asking for something you think I already know?” Don’t do that, her father had said once. If you know something, you know it. Meredith followed Dr. Vargas into the stairwell. “Have you been there with a patient, that’s all I’m asking. When the process happened?”

“I’m not a neurologist. I’m not a psychiatrist. Once the baby is delivered, and their wounds are healing well enough, I’m done with them. The hospital says I’m done with them.” Lights flickered around them. Somewhere, lightning or wind must have upset the power. Meredith should have chosen something to fill her year in engineering, physics, math. Fields that explained falling. Dr. Vargas turned her tablet light to the floor. “There’s a division of duties here.”

“So why recommend that your patients forget?”

“What do you remember about your fall?”

“I’m not your patient, either.” Meredith turned back toward the ward. The light around her felt sudden, and yet no more useful than the light that half-hid Dr. Vargas. How much had she told Dr. Vargas about her accident? Other than that she’d fallen and injured herself on the day of the high school graduation exam. Other than that she’d twisted her leg behind her on the stair and passed out. Pain, she’d said. Pain. Not that she’d hit her head as hard as she had done. Not that she had known Dr. Hughes because of her fall. “But if I were, would you tell me to do it?”

“No, you’re not asking me that. You’re asking me if I would go through with the procedure.” Dr. Vargas sat down on the stair. Above them, someone spoke a one-sided conversation into a tablet; below them, another voice echoed it in what seemed to be a lagged version of the other side. “I don’t think I would undergo it. I would feel like I’m missing part of myself.”

“But you haven’t gone through anything that terrible.”

“Not as far as I know, I suppose. But not wanting to do something myself is quite different from not wanting others to have access to it.”

Beneath her, her body pulled toward the stair on which Dr. Vargas sat. Meredith leaned against the door frame, fought against the urge to descend. “I think someone took the book you gave me. I’m sorry. I tried to keep it safe in my locker.”

“It’s an old book, Meredith. I’ll find you another copy.”

A door slammed. She couldn’t tell whether it was above her or below. “You were married once, weren’t you?”

“A while ago, yeah.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t remember.”

Outside room 307, Meredith hesitated. The head tech was on break, and no one manned his station. She could hear Phoebe singing from behind the heavy door, not quite a lullaby, not quite a hymn. She should let them bond, shouldn’t she? Let Phoebe get to know her son before they took her son and all memory of him from her. The system was easy enough to get around. The thermometers and the blood pressure machines went offline often enough that she knew she could enter some numbers within the range of the numbers she’d already taken the hours before. Wasn’t that the benefit of being young, healthy? That you were almost assured of that continued youth, health?

No, the head nurse tech would tell her that it wasn’t. That things would happen. That things always happen. Blood pressures drop. Temperatures spike. Fevers, sepsis. What she was here for. Nurses too busy for her routine. Doctors too much not needed—Phoebe had no wounds, no episiotomy, no tears. A small baby, an easy birth. The last nurse’s note said she’d been progressing normally from labor. To? Progressing normally. No complications expected. Normal blood pressures, normal temperatures so far.

So far.

Meredith cracked the door. Phoebe sang. Not a lullaby, not a hymn. Meredith recognized the song, a slow ballad popular among the kids a few years ahead of her in what seemed like a time ages ago now. A love song. She turned on her table light.

“You have a pretty voice,” she said. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“Jason sang that to me.” Phoebe opened her mouth for the thermometer, then hummed the same tune around it. In her arms, the baby—Phoebe’s baby—finally looked relaxed, hands slightly opening in his sleep, mouth puckered around a note his mother couldn’t sing. “I already forgot half the words to it.”

“I could play it for you now if you want. I don’t have it downloaded, but I’m sure I could stream it for you.”

“You don’t know it?”

The baby stirred, reached up for something against his swaddling. “I’m not a fan of the band.”

“Jason told me about bands,” Phoebe said. She held her son in the optimal comforting position before moving her arm toward the blood pressure cuff. “Said he was in one. And he tried to tell me about streaming. We don’t have that. Not most of us.”

Meredith held the blood pressure monitor away from the bed, the cuff, Phoebe’s arm, in which the baby slept. Phoebe wouldn’t know if she’d skipped this round of monitoring, if she’d plugged numbers into her tablet that matched the pattern she’d established in her previous rounds. “I thought you shunned technology. Or your culture does. The Internet anyway.”

“He’s just the prettiest baby I ever seen.”

“Of course,” Meredith said. She turned the light up on her tablet, which glowed over Phoebe’s bed. In the silence, the monitors should have chirped. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t right of me to bring up.”

“No, I ain’t shy about Indweller life.” Phoebe looked up from her baby. “Daddy tells me we keep technology stopped where it was before things got too unholy in the world. Like we could just keep ourselves right at the good spot with machines that help us live right. Farm equipment we got lots of. Internet we don’t got any of. So I guess I just seen babies born where my home is. And few around here now, what I can see going down the hall.” She looked back down at her son. “Still he’s just the prettiest.”

“He is pretty.” Meredith moved closer to the bed, took Phoebe’s arm and slid the cuff around it. Beneath her, Phoebe held her son in the sort of one-armed clutch mothers of later-born children use, or the ones who had experience with other babies. Which, given her Indweller culture, Phoebe must have: younger siblings, sisters with newborns, younger aunts, cousins, all immediate, all present in a physical, daunting way. No Vita-Cribs, no distance. No stream chats with relatives, long after the fatigue of the newborn months has worn off. A chirp drew Meredith back to the room. Normal blood pressure. Meredith verified the readings had fed into Phoebe’s record. “He’s very pretty.”

“Just the prettiest.”

“If you need anything, press this button.” Meredith pointed.

Phoebe slid her hand over Meredith’s. “Stay. I like you asking about Indweller life.” “No one else asks you about it?” She took her hand back and wound the tube from the cuff back around the bed rail. “Not the nurse?”

“Guess that nurse from the forgetting thing come talk to me for a minute about it. He didn’t ask questions about big things, like the farm. Just about me and my family, mostly.” The baby stirred; Phoebe swayed beneath him. “I guess that was nice to talk about too.”

Meredith sat in the chair beside the bed, the chair like so many others in other rooms that were so often occupied by fathers, grandparents, siblings. She sat, warmly, impersonally. Listened warmly, impersonally. “It is nice to talk about where we come from, isn’t it?”

“Ground don’t feel right here,” Phoebe said. “I want to feel that under my feet. Not this floor. Don’t want him to learn to walk on it, but I guess it’s better. Someone good will want him.”

“I can ask about the adoption liaison if you’d like.”

“You don’t have to walk on this floor all the time. You got outside, like real outside with real dirt to walk on, don’t you?” Phoebe pulled her son back to her chest.

“We have a courtyard at my home building, like a little flower garden outside,” Meredith said. Most buildings did. “And there’s an atrium in the hospital. That’s like a courtyard with walls. Birds fly in all the time. It’s nice.”

“We got birds at home, too. Good ones. Useful ones, Daddy says.”

“Pretty ones, I’m sure.”

“It’d be nice to see the ones that weren’t so useful. Pretty ones that don’t got a job to do in the orange trees.” Phoebe pointed at the blood pressure monitor. “You’re useful, aren’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

“Guess someone can be useful and pretty, can’t they?” She sat up. “Can I go home?”

“You’d have to talk to your doctor about that.” Phoebe fluttered in the bed, waking the baby. He rooted, then settled. “You done took all those readings. You know if I’m okay to go home, don’t you?”

Meredith stood, warmly, impersonally. “I can make a note in your chart that you’d like to discuss your discharge with your doctor.”

“If I left now, he’d have to come with me, wouldn’t he?”

“I can ask about the adoption liaison if you’d like.”

“You done said that already.”

Warmly, impersonally.

As Meredith left, Phoebe moved to return her son to the Vita-Crib. She couldn’t stay, couldn’t watch Phoebe looking down at her son. Learning him? Memorizing him? Wishing him a good life, or hers for always, or gone?

A message pulled her back to her tablet. Formalities: she’d have to go up to Neurology soon and tour the facilities with the nurse. A brief orientation for a tech who didn’t usually work on that ward, meant for one who’d never been there as a patient. She hadn’t been there as a patient, not in the Memory Reprocessing Suite, not strapped into the narrow bed that would be Phoebe’s for a day. “You would just be here for the first half-hour or so, just until she’s fully sedated and hooked into the Reprocessor,” the nurse explained. “She’ll spend several hours asleep after that, recovering.” He tapped something into his tablet, which he held almost vertically between them. “You can see her in the morning, if you’d like.”

“Will she remember me?”

“Good question.”

Meredith almost placed her hand on the Reprocessor, but she stopped herself. What all fell under the name of a single instrument was, in fact, a series of monitoring equipment, a virtual reality helmet, and a stimulation device. Did Dr. Hughes even know how it all worked? The process, as he’d explained it to her, seemed simple, fail-proof. Phoebe would be sedated then given the medication and brain stimulation to diminish the memory of Jason, the memory of her birth experience here alone. And then, the new memories would be implanted:

the long illness of the past year, the crisis point at which her husband and parents brought her to the hospital, and her miraculous recovery.

Simple. Fail-proof.

The nurse pointed to a monitor. “You can watch her temperature and blood pressure readings here or on your tablet. Up to you. The Reprocessor will let us know if anything looks bad, though.”

“This will make her one of them again, won’t it?”

“Maybe. We don’t exactly have the technology to do a mass reprocessing on the rest of them.”

“What if one of the Indwellers tells her about what really happened?”

“You’re trying to ask gold-star questions again, aren’t you?” He pointed at the cuff that would be around Phoebe’s arm during the procedure. “Look, it’s just her mom and dad and her husband who know. Just wheel her up here, make her good and comfy, and make sure she keeps this thing on. And remember, your job isn’t to think about where she’ll be in a year.” He tapped his tablet screen. “You’re set to check out a wheelchair from maternity. It’ll be set up in her room when we’re ready. Your job is just to get her up here and make sure she’s ready.”

Meredith stopped herself from saying what she knew the nurse must have been thinking, that her job was to quit this job soon, get married, and find herself on the maternity ward soon after. No, that wasn’t it. That was too simple, wasn’t it?

“My job is to think about where she’ll be in a couple hours, right?”

He’d left her to escort herself back out of the Memory Reprocessing Suite.

“She’ll be an Indweller again. She’ll have a miraculous recovery from the illness they invented, and she’ll get to live among her people again.” Dr. Hughes said. Meredith had stopped in front of the ward’s gaping windows and looked out where the rain had been. “Strange. It’s like nothing happened out there.”

Meredith looked away from her reflection, back at her doctor, or the neurologist who’d been her doctor. “I don’t understand.”

“Coating on the building, the glass, the walkways, something. They put it on, so when the rain stops, it’s like nothing happened out there. The sidewalks should be darker. I remember that from when I was a kid, running around the older parts of the city.” He smoothed the shoulder of his coat, which formed a nearly unnoticeable outline around him. “The girl. She’ll go home. She’ll get past this. Or what it looks like it was. Her family will embrace her. She’ll go home and be herself again. An Indweller.”

“Can we let her remember the sound of the rain here?”

“Are you asking if it’s possible? Or if we can let her hold on to something from her time here?”

Meredith’s tablet flashed. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Back on the maternity ward, Meredith looked out of each opened window for signs of the rain. Evening meant fewer windows would be open, though those that were let in almost too

much light to see clearly the buildings around them and the sidewalks below. She hadn't noticed before that there should be any signs of the rain once it had passed, only that odd cleanliness that came from something washing away, then something slipping away from her.

Light from the hall cut room 307, splitting it where the Vita-Crib had been, where a window might have been had Phoebe's room had one. "Phoebe," Meredith called quietly, though there was no one to wake. The bed was empty.

She shut the door, turned into the hallway, and saw Phoebe, fingers curled around the doorway of a darkened room, her gaze fixed on what she probably couldn't see clearly within. "Phoebe," Meredith called again.

Phoebe fluttered away from the door, toward the wall opposite. She struck the wall, flailed in her light blue gown, and skittered back toward her own room. "I didn't mean nothing bad," she said. "I promise."

"Patient privacy," Meredith half-whispered as she guided Phoebe back into her room, back onto the curl of bedding. "No, it's okay. Phoebe, we just need you to stay in your room. In your bed if you can. Rest."

"Isn't that all I done since I got to this room?"

"I know, I know." Meredith wrapped the cuff around Phoebe's arm. She looked over at the corner, where Phoebe wasn't looking. "It'll just be a couple more hours at most. Then."

"Then the forgetting thing." She pulled the cuff from her arm before the machine could inflate it. Meredith could write down numbers, anything not too wild and not too improbably. "They looked like a nice couple. Saw them in the hallway. Adoption lady finally come. She asked if I wanted to meet them. I guess I did."

Meredith covered her thermometer with a disposable cap. "That's good. That they look nice."

"It's a good thing I'm doing, isn't it. They tried so long and nothing. Could be my Momma and Daddy's age, I guess. They tried so long and nothing." Phoebe clenched her mouth shut. Meredith removed the thermometer's cap and tossed it into the trash. More numbers for later.

"You'll get to go home soon," Meredith said. "There's that."

"That something you say to all the new mommas itching to get out of here? Go home with their new babies, like?" Phoebe hooked her finger in her mouth for a moment. "Yeah, it'd be nice to see Momma and Daddy. And Jonah. He's my husband. Every time he's gonna look at me from now on, seeing me healed, he's gonna know, isn't he?"

Meredith unwound the blood-pressure cuff and took Phoebe's arm in her hand. Something soft about her arm, half-exposed by the gown sleeve. "He won't be the only one, will he?"

She shook her head. "Just Jonah and Momma and Daddy. No one else. They told everyone I was sick all this time and couldn't see nobody. Jonah said he'd marry me I could have a husband in Heaven, since I was so close to dying." Phoebe grunted. "Should say Daddy married me off to Jonah after I told Momma I thought there might be a baby. Momma said we

might have been able to keep quiet and have me keep the baby, but Daddy couldn't arrange things fast enough. And Jonah said he wouldn't raise no outworker baby anyway. His first wife done gone off with one of the outworkers a few years back, so Momma said it was justice done, him getting a pretty young wife at Daddy's age." Her blood-pressure read normal on the monitor. "Maybe it was. Maybe having my boy for those nice folks was justice too in a way."

"I need to take your temperature."

"You think they can find Jason, tell him about the baby? About me?"

Meredith inserted the thermometer into Phoebe's gaping mouth. "I'll ask the head tech."

The thermometer chirped: no fever. "I want to go home." Phoebe pulled her blanket around her, a tight nest against a rain that had already stopped. "Maybe Jason will work the next harvest. Think I'd like that."

Meredith left her there, Phoebe half-mouthing her desire to go home. Home. Did she know where that was, what that was? She seemed so much like a bird in a fruit tree, singing at the blooms to will them to turn into fruit before their time. A mechanical bird, a farmed tree.

Warmly, impersonally, she made her rounds for the hour. Meredith knew the hospital, knew the way staircases turn, the way landings hide coves. Before her fall, she'd known how to step nearly silently on stairs. If her stiff leg would let her, she'd probably remember. She'd spent too many breaks reading in the stairwells; she knew how light fell, knew how shadows fell. So there was that. They'd have to take an elevator, though. Phoebe had just had a baby, after all. To?

They would take the elevator to the Memory Reprocessing Suite soon. She hadn't told Phoebe yet that she would be accompanying her on that ride up. Dr. Hughes hadn't instructed her to do so, nor had the nurse. She wouldn't have been expected to, would she? Warmly, impersonally?

Meredith wrapped cuffs around arms, inserted thermometers, waited. She glanced out windows when she could, out at the dry evening that looked as though it could have come at the end of a dry day. She looked over the steps of the procedure when she'd had a moment between patients, those inevitable waits when doctors or nurses were in with the new mothers and their newborns. She'd be part of the unit, wouldn't she?

And after?

The way careers are made. Not on this ward. Not the same thing, over and over. She knew how lights fell; she knew how shadows fell. She knew how she had fallen. A year behind, did it make a difference? She had some money saved now, too, and she could get out of the city for a while if she wanted. Not far, and not for long. But it would be a break. From Dr. Hughes's patient to his plodder to his protegee.

Wind the cuff, press the button, unwind the cuff, confirm the reading in her tablet. Open, insert, close, confirm. Again and again.

Something about it seemed necessary, the forgetting. That easy removal of what shouldn't have been. Meredith was curious about the process, wasn't she? About how the

doctors cut away some threatening part but strangely left the self in tact. Or did they? Warmly, impersonally, they crafted what was best. Who was best.

“You hold their hands,” Dr. Vargas said. Meredith had found her in the hospital cafeteria, slouched and looking into a cup of weak tea, which she’d nestled into the crook of her elbow. “You hold their hands and get on with it. It’s what you do already, isn’t it?”

“I take blood pressure readings. I check for fevers.” Meredith rubbed the muscle just above her left knee. She’d bothered looking it up after her fall, the name of the muscle she’d injured and the tendon running alongside. Curiosity. Her leg was the least of her problems after her fall, but still, she had to know. Both her leg and her head ached, or one did enough for both of them. “I’m there to keep an eye on the mothers, just in case.”

“And you have a case?” Dr. Vargas lifted her cup and swirled the tea within it. “You’ve told me time and again: warm and impersonal. The machines, they’re the impersonal. What does that leave you to be?”

Meredith sat. She peeled an orange and ate it too quickly to taste it. The few minutes until her next round of blood-pressures and temperatures leaned on her like that dense humidity between the buildings where the wind can’t reach. “How do I hold her hand?”

“Just watch the machines. Ask a few good, well timed questions. And forget about Phoebe. She’ll be fine.” She finished her tea. “You’ll be fine.”

“It’s the side door into a career, isn’t it?”

Dr. Vargas stood up. “I have to go. If it makes you feel better, there’s another book in my locker. Take it. You’ll enjoy it. Take your mind off things. I’ll send you a one-time use code for the lock.”

Meredith rushed on her stiff leg to the doctors’ lounge. No one was inside. On her tablet was the series of numbers she tapped into the keypad on the locker bearing Dr. Vargas’ name. She should have gone straight back to her rounds. The door popped open. She lifted a canvas bag, from which fell the sleeve of a dress the doctor might have worn home. Under the bag lay a worn paperback, one Dr. Vargas had mentioned to her before. She slipped the book under her arm, then replaced the canvas bag. Before she closed the door, she pulled the dress from the bag. Shapeless, it hung from her hands. She held it up for a moment. Beneath the dress was a pair of canvas shoes that could have been any size, a loose jacket, and few large bills. Enough. Enough to get Phoebe out of this part of the city and to the women’s shelter the hospital sometimes sent new mothers to when they couldn’t, for too many reasons, go home. And Dr. Vargas knew she’d see this, didn’t she?

The book fell from beneath her arm.

She picked it up. She looked inside for some message, some inscription, but found none.

Meredith replaced the book where it had been in the locker, took the canvas bag, and slammed the door shut.

The head tech had watched Meredith carrying the canvas bag to her chest in the “optimal comforting position”—he must have. She’d felt him watching her, even if she didn’t see him. She had slipped it into Phoebe’s room before her next round began. Thankfully, Phoebe had

been asleep. (Had Dr. Hughes given her the sedative already?) Thankfully, she was the last patient on the round for the shift. (Had Dr. Hughes arranged this, an easy transfer from Maternity to Neurology?) Meredith started her rounds, again the same patients, same order, same tasks, holding herself aloft from what was scratching and wheeling inside her.

“Phoebe,” Meredith said. “I’m going to turn on the light now.”

“I’m waking up.” Phoebe pulled the sheet from over her head. “I just done napped a bit. Wasn’t sure what was gonna go on next with the forgetting thing. It’s almost time, right? Nurse come down and told me you’d be going with me. First part of it anyway. Didn’t tell me nothing else. Guess there’s not nothing else I need to know. Do I get in that thing now?” She pointed to the wheelchair that was set up in the corner of the room.

Meredith pulled the canvas bag from beneath the bed. Once again, she held the bag to her chest.

“You got something there?”

“No,” Meredith started. She set the bag on the gray tiles beneath the bed. “Let’s do your blood pressure and temperature. One last time.”

Phoebe shrugged and held out her arm. Meredith turned to connect the cuff to the monitor. She felt the flutter of Phoebe’s hand reaching down to the bag brushed against her leg. “This is right pretty.” She pulled the dress up and held it to her. “Shoes, not so much, but the dress is right pretty.”

Meredith ripped the cuff from Phoebe’s arm. If there were no measurements, then she could easily say Phoebe had gone by the time she’d arrived to meet the dimness inside room 307. “Put that on. Shoes and jacket too.”

Phoebe shrugged again and dressed. Meredith turned off the lights. She checked the hallway, then led Phoebe into the wheelchair and into the darkness of the back hallway. “Where we going? Is this part of the forgetting thing?”

Meredith hushed her. Three stories in the service elevator, then out the back door to a shadowed alleyway. The sun hadn’t quite set; the street lights hadn’t quite reached their full brightness. Two blocks to the tram stop. They could leave the wheelchair on the sidewalk, set it to return itself to the hospital. Then eleven blocks on the tram to the shelter.

Once they were on the tram, she’d explain. She’d explain everything. Her leg ached. Her head ached. Phoebe fluttered her hands in her lap. “I don’t like this,” Phoebe said. “I don’t like this part of the forgetting thing.” Meredith hushed Phoebe once more in the alleyway.

“If you’ll be patient with me, I’ll explain. Soon.” She grabbed the wheelchair’s handles tighter and half-ran Phoebe to the tram stop, less than a block away now.

No tram yet. At the tram stop, Meredith finally let go of the wheelchair. She felt the money in her pocket, the bills from Dr. Vargas’s bag and the few she’d pulled from the cash machine in the hospital cafeteria. “Here, just take this. Hold on to it. Tight.”

Phoebe looked down at the paper in her hands. “I don’t like this part of the forgetting thing.”

A tram pulled into the stop. Meredith ran, pushing Phoebe toward it. "Get on, now." Meredith climbed aboard, pulling Phoebe onto the step as the tram lurched forward.

"You're not going to forget anything, Phoebe. It's okay. I'll explain." Meredith let go of her hand and looked warmly, impersonally at her patient. Her former patient.

The tram pulled forward. Phoebe looked down at the sidewalk, then back at Meredith. She hopped from the tram and grabbed her unbraided hair. "It's okay, I'll explain." Meredith tried to hop from the tram step as lightly as Phoebe had, but she landed on her stiff leg and fell. "It's okay, another one will come. We'll wait."

Mouth open, swaying in the strange dress, Phoebe leaned down toward Meredith then righted herself. She looked down and smoothed the dress over her belly.

"I'm okay," Meredith said. "I just need to sit for a moment. I'm trying to help you." Phoebe looked at Meredith again, shook her head, then stepped back and turned.

Another tram pulled up to the stop. Not one going to the shelter, but they had more than enough money for the transfers. "Wait, and I'll get on with you. Let me explain. Please."

Phoebe shook her head again. She threw the paper bills at Meredith. Holding her belly, she stepped up into the tram and disappeared inside. The tram disappeared on its tracks between two buildings.

Meredith called after Phoebe once, then she pushed herself up from the sidewalk. A breeze wound around the building; her sweat-soaked scrubs cooled and lifted from her skin. The faint scent of citrus surrounded her.

The empty wheelchair trundled back toward the hospital.

Another tram would come.

And another.

Someone would find Phoebe. Someone would do for her what Meredith failed to do.

She pushed herself on toward her home building, half-dragging her leg as if to lure something away from where she'd been.

The smell of oranges, ripe and bitter, followed.

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T.D. Walker is the author of Small Waiting Objects (CW Books 2019), a collection of poems that examine domestic life through near-future technologies.

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