

Novitiate

Last night, Florence lost her battle. And last fall's acorns have taken root, shoots breaking forth from husks we neglected. They grip the earth with tiny fingers—surprisingly strong for such small things. We pull them out, one by one; they resist at first, then yield, the way life clings and clings and clings until it doesn't.

Florence was six, child of our friends. We look for signs. The crocus blooms early. Leaves spell secrets in mud puddles. *A blue line means the test is positive.* A rainbow stretches across the sky, over a forest still cradling night's darkness. The closet light goes out.

Novice gardener, city-dweller, I know little of nature's rhythms—the innate or the irregular. But I know well this sense of chaos encroaching, the eternal yank and pull of it. Vines weave through a neighbor's fence; the clover runs rampant, the mint escapes its borders.

Two weeks before she died, Florence brought Valentines to the patients in her pediatric transplant unit. *Patient: bearing provocation, annoyance, misfortune, hardship, pain, with fortitude and calm, and without complaint or anger.* In gardening, one must be patient. The Guide says *Accept that you will make mistakes. Some things will live; others won't.* You should familiarize yourself with the plants on your property. Wait a season to learn what blooms, and where, and when. At the funeral the lector says *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I live so that you shall live.* Florence's parents say *Thank you for sharing her journey with us. Journey means travel or passage from one place to another—to go from home to a distance.*

This week, your baby is the size of a poppy seed. This week, a lima bean. The doctor says, *We can't control everything.* I look past him at the ceiling tiles, where someone's painted a fishing boat with the phrase "Look for the silver lining"—a message of hope meant for me, the patient, flat on my back with a hand inside me. But the only silver line I see is the one the fish is caught on—frozen mid-leap, hook in its mouth. Miscarriages are common, the doctor says—one in three. *It's entirely possible that when you try again, everything will go smoothly.*

After the funeral, kids blow bubbles on church steps. Later, behind the reception hall, they play on the jungle gym, lining up on a platform to descend the tunnel slide. The smaller ones hesitate—higher than it looked, no mother waiting at the bottom. Still they enter, one by one, to embark on this strange and sightless passage—emerging someplace unseen, far into the future, where everything is slightly different.

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