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Karen Regen-Tuero

Belongings

Once it was decided, everything was fairly straightforward. The lady on the phone (impatient, with a thick Indian accent) had said, “Nothing to eat or drink after midnight, ay! Not even water or candy. Do you understand, Virginia?” as if she were a child, not a middle-aged mother of a kindergartner. Her appointment was for 7:45am, so she thought that if she went to bed early without reading, there would be just a few hours in the morning—while she laid out Laura’s clothes, made Laura pancakes and Pete a buttered raisin bun and left the house in the dark—when she would have nothing in her stomach to pad the nausea.

When she got to Main Street in Flushing, to the bus stop for the Express into the city (walking slowly, her hood up against the cold, past the shops, all shuttered, except Sweety’s, the bakery where she worked, the odor of yeast making her nausea thicken), a young man dressed like a lawyer smiled at her. He always took the 6:10; he liked to get a jump on the day, he said with some satisfaction. He had an appointment in Tribeca. But he worked in midtown. He stopped speaking, wafting of musk that made her sicker, and waited for her to respond with her destination. “I have a doctor’s appointment. Downtown,” she said and smiled quickly.

She lowered her gaze, pushed back her drooping glasses, conscious of how bad she looked (not realizing that it was still too dark out for anyone to notice). The woman on the phone had given further instructions in that scolding voice: “No makeup, no jewelry, no contact lenses. Understand, Virginia?” She was dressed now in loose-fitting

clothes—old tan corduroys and a long-sleeved cotton T-shirt that hung out, covered by a flannel shirt and a parka.

On the bus (a sudden rush of warm air that smelled of cloves, mint, a headache-inducing upholstery cleaner; her tilted head tapping against the window), she tried to remember the last time she'd been into Manhattan. There was less and less of a reason to go in now that Laura's weekends were spent with school friends in Flushing. They used to go often when Laura was a toddler, taking her to the lake with the boats in Central Park, Virginia's favorite spot when she was single and lived close enough to walk there with a book. After, she would take Laura for a stroll along Madison Avenue, past the boutiques with the elegantly hung dresses in the windows that showed no prices. She would point out where Pete had once worked, the bookstore now turned into a jeweler. Then she would take Laura into La Chatelaine, the bakery where Virginia once worked. Mrs. G., cooing at Laura's fair eyes, would feed her a raisin bun, the row of diamonds on her fingers flashing, telling her the story of Laura's start: that one day a young man came in and, looking past all the *petit fours* and *gateau* cakes, ordered the plainest confection they had: a raisin bun. He came back for one every day since.

"There's the raisin bun boy," Mrs. G. used to tease Virginia until Virginia learned his name and correcting her, said, "There's Pete."

Virginia, proud to show off this fancy, pre-borough-of Queens life, always returned to Flushing feeling diminished, remembering a time when she had plans to open her own shop; all she needed was to save some money. She never would have imagined

that years later, she would still be counter help, only now the confections would all be plain—scones and pound cake—and the boutiques flanking the shop would be a Korean fishing supply house and a karaoke bar.

From time to time, as the bus rode on (now passing a cemetery with monuments that rose like gray spikes) she was conscious of the lawyer beside her occasionally smiling at her. She glanced back at him, pleased by the attention but confounded, then turned to the window until her head was again tapping against the glass.

After an hour or so she saw the familiar jagged skyline lit by a touch of sun. Commuters hurried on the sidewalk, clutching cups of take-out coffee, moving past the windows of an office supply store decorated with cutouts of goblins. The bus pulled to a stop, letting her, the lawyer and a half dozen others off. “Have a good day,” the lawyer called, turning to her as she climbed down off the bus after him. “Maybe I’ll see you again. Do you come in often?”

“Not really.”

“Oh.” Disappointment spread over his face. He stood there a moment on the sidewalk.

“Your appointment. In Tribeca,” she said. “You’ll be late.”

He nodded and trudged away.

She found her way to the subway, and onto the #6 train, as the woman on the phone had said. Bleeker Street was the stop she needed. Each time the train doors opened she strained to see the stop until eventually she saw what looked like BLEAK, formed on the dark tiles on the wall.

After some confusion—walking in the wrong direction, toward Broadway—she turned herself around. Light was in the day. She looked for a brown brick building, as the woman had said. Outside a group of women were smoking. “Oh, there you are! Where you been, girl!” one said, waving in Virginia’s direction. Virginia pointed to herself, thinking for a moment that the woman was talking to her.

Inside, was the kind of metal detector used at airports. A guard, with the face of a bulldog, was seated behind an open plexi-glass window. She barked at Virginia for her to hand over her book bag. “You have keys? Jewelry?” she said in an accusing way.

“No. They told me not to bring anything.” All that she had with her in the bag was a book that Pete had just given her for her fortieth birthday. *A Woman’s Guide to Success in Small Business*. The book was inscribed, “It’s never too late! Love, Your Greatest Admirer.” She was hoping that reading it would distract her.

The guard held onto the navy straps of the canvas bag with her big hands and stared at her, waiting. “Can’t I keep the book?” Virginia said. “I may have to wait.”

“Don’t you see a gate there? In front of you?” the guard yelled. “Walk through the gate! Then you’ll get your bag.”

Virginia stepped through. The alarm rang. She emptied her parka of change and tried again.

She had expected to be first; that was what the lady on the phone had said, that she was the first appointment. It was important for her to start early so that she could leave by one o’clock, in time to pick up Laura at school and continue on with the day, Halloween, dressing Laura as a princess, herself as a ghost, accompanying her through the neighborhood, as if nothing had happened to Virginia earlier in the day. But the waiting

room was already occupied, three other women ahead of her. One, in a red turtleneck with her hair up, had her head in her hand. Another, in a skirt and black tights and matching gum-soled shoes, reached for a magazine on the table then put it back down again, curling her legs toward her stomach in the seat. An Ethiopian-looking woman had her head lowered and was sobbing. Adding herself to the group—her face drawn with no makeup, her eyes clouded behind her round glasses, her hand over her stomach—Virginia thought she had never seen such openly sad-looking women in a public place.

She was told to sign in, which she did, then she sat down on one of the blue-gray leather-backed couches. The other three women each made eye contact with her and, to various degrees, returned her quick sympathetic smile. She tried to settle into the wait, remembered the book in her bag but didn't feel up to it. One by one, more women filed in, many younger than Virginia but some her age, until the room became warmer from so many people and she had to move her book bag from the seat beside her to make room.

After a while, her name was called and she was asked what she was there for. She answered, but the word was hard to get out and when it did, it came out too softly for the receptionist to hear, so she was made to repeat it, louder, so that it seemed to reverberate through the room.

Registration papers were handed to her and she was instructed to find an elevator at the back of the room and take it to the second floor. She passed another desk fitted with another office worker who was making a phone call, snapping gum, and entering data into a computer, like a worker at any other office might do, apparently oblivious to being surrounded by quietly sobbing strangers. Virginia was acutely aware of an absence of light—of air—and realized now there were no windows. Not one.

On the second floor, was another waiting room. Filled. Despite all the people, it was colder here than on the first floor, necessitating Virginia's parka, which bore down, making her steps slower. She gave the registration papers to another receptionist, who handed her a pile of forms. By now, Virginia's mouth was so dry she had stopped speaking to conserve saliva, her stomach so empty she took baby steps to the nearest seat to prevent unnecessary jolts.

Across from her, was the Ethiopian, the woman with the red turtleneck, and the one with the gum-soled shoes, each of them filling out forms. Virginia followed suit, stopping at the question, "Has anyone forced you against your will to make this decision?"

She lay the pen down and clasped her hands on the clipboard, rubbing her thumb over her knuckles of one hand, which were red from the cold. It had been Pete's decision. But she had agreed. She'd thought that if he was against another child, what was the point? A few years ago, when Laura was just two, she had told him that she wanted one more. But he had said no, there was not enough money. "That's no reason," she said. "There are people with more kids who get by on less." But Pete had wanted nothing to do with it. "Besides," he added. "What about work? The bakery you used to talk about? You'll never get that off the ground with another baby."

"You can't have everything," she had said. "I'd take another baby over a bakery. I can always do the bakery later."

But Pete had just slung his arm around her shoulder and laughed. "You're not getting any younger, sweetheart. Now's the time to do it. Not later."

He'd brought home book after book for her, from the bookstore he'd switched to in Woodside, closer to home, after the one on Madison closed down. Every self-esteem

building, pro-woman book there was about running a business, he brought her and she read. But then, last month, she found herself pregnant.

“Right this way,” a woman with red hair and a nice smile was saying, in a thick Russian accent. Virginia was given a sonogram. “Right this way,” a man with curly hair piled at the top of his head was saying, having her sit down in a lab room and give him a vein. “Right this way,” a younger woman (was she old enough to be working? Virginia wondered), leading her to a small office room, where Virginia was asked questions about her medical history and then if she had any questions.

“No, I don’t think so,” Virginia said. Then she looked at the woman and asked if she had ever had one.

“Me?” the woman said, her face, all innocence, looking embarrassed. “No.”

Virginia felt bad; she hadn’t meant the question that way. She had just thought that most of the women who worked there had themselves been through it. How else could they feel comfortable working there?

She was led to a dressing room where she was handed two large plastic bags and instructed to take off everything and put it in the bags. She was to put on a thin faded cotton robe and brown paper shoes.

“It’s cold in here,” Virginia said.

“You can put your jacket on over the robe,” the woman said.

Door closed, she watched herself in the mirror that seemed unnecessarily large, as if one would really want to contemplate one’s entire body under the circumstances. What an idea, Virginia thought. Then her thoughts returned to an earlier one, which had troubled her yesterday, holding Laura while she read to her in bed. Laura was heavy against

her stomach and breasts, which hurt the way they once did before milk for Laura started to come in. Virginia had to keep telling her to move off of her; it hurt. “It always hurts,” Laura complained and Virginia was reminded that two weeks of a mother’s complaints had to feel like forever to a child. “I’ll feel better soon,” she had reassured her, as if it were just a flu, something that—Kleenex gone, bottles of Pepto-Bismol tossed out—she would get over. She came to that awful, sticking thought again: what would Laura think if she knew? How many times had Laura said that she wanted a brother or sister? And Virginia had agreed it would be nice, sometimes imagining out loud how much fun Laura would have holding and feeding the baby, ever-practical Laura completing the details with the arrowroot biscuits Virginia would need to bring home in quantity from Sweety’s, making sure they were packed in a box, not a bag, so they wouldn’t crumble. Yes, Virginia knew, you were not supposed to be bothered by the wants of a five-year old. But still.

When she came out of the waiting room, the weight of the bags in her arms was too much for her and a nurse helped her. She was shown to another waiting area surrounded by banks of yellow lockers that reached over her head. At eye level was a sign in black marker: “We are not responsible for stolen belongings!”

She sat down but the phrase kept tossing around in her head as if she were aboard a ship. To steady herself, she tried to focus on the woman seated across from her. The woman, whom she recognized, had been wearing a red turtleneck but now was dressed in the same faded robe that Virginia had on, thick tan legs sticking out from under the hem. She had her hair up with a clip behind her head. Most of her teeth seemed to be missing, except for the front two, like Mrs. Sweety from the bakery, as if life had been hard on her, but she smiled easily at Virginia.

“The African lady. She’s gone now. They just took her,” the woman said. “She was taking it hard.”

The Ethiopian, Virginia thought, nodding in response as she placed the other patient’s face, smooth and round, in her mind.

“Before that, they took the girl in the skirt.”

The one with the gum-soled shoes, Virginia thought.

“She was very matter-of-fact. No crying there.”

The woman smiled at Virginia again, making Virginia want to talk. “I have one child already. One’s really enough.”

“Oh sure. It’s not easy,” the woman said gently. “I have three. The last one’s just eighteen months.”

“Three,” Virginia said. Then she began to cry.

“Aw. There, there.” She gave her a tissue from the box on the table.

“I’ve already decided. I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” Virginia said, wiping away. “I’m just trying to decide between the general and the local,” she added, wanting to see which this patient was choosing.

“Go for the general. The Sodium Benadryl. I’m used to it. From work they’re doing on my teeth. They put you out, next thing, you wake up. It’s over. I’m a scardy-cat. I don’t like pain.”

“Me neither.” But on the other hand, she didn’t like the idea of being knocked out. Maybe, after the pain of childbirth, this wouldn’t be *so* bad. Local should be enough.

The doctor was a heavy-set man with a light brown mustache and the friendly manner of Mr. Dolton, the dentist who used to let her rinse her mouth with strawberry

flavored wash as a child. The doctor was joined by a nurse with cornrows and long black square-tipped acrylic fingernails. The radio was playing, which could have been a nice touch, but it was a rap song with a beat that hit Virginia's heart under her gown like bullets.

"You'll have to scoot all the way down," the nurse said. "All the way."

Virginia did her best, holding the dressing gown up while she lay back on the table, the air cold between her legs. *One more child*, she thought. *What was wrong with one more child?*

She handed her folded glasses to the nurse and the cornrows went blurry.

"Now let your legs relax," the doctor said, snapping on gloves, the smell of latex rising to Virginia's nostrils.

She tried but the music made her feel as if she was standing in the middle of Harlem.

"Do you think we could listen to something a little more soothing," she tried, not wanting to offend them for their taste in music.

The nurse shut the radio off. This was no help at all, Virginia thought, because now there was just the sound of her screaming.

The doctor stopped doing what he was doing, sat up and looked at her as if she were out of her mind.

"It hurts," she explained.

"I haven't done anything yet."

"Oh." She thought back on the lady in the waiting room with the bad teeth. Maybe general wasn't such a bad idea.

The anesthesiologist was called in; he came fast. He spoke with a thick Jamaican accent. She tried not to be concerned by this. She told herself that, as an immigrant, he was probably more qualified than anyone born here because he'd had to fight harder to get to where he was. The argument didn't work.

She felt him take her arm as she lay back on the table. He seemed to be looking for a vein in the crook of the arm, lifting the bandage from the blood test, and, not finding one there, pricking the top of her hand. She turned away, telling herself not to think of the burning sensation. "You're going to feel some burning," he said now.

"Burning," she repeated.

She thought of the lawyer on the bus that morning. The way he had looked at her with his heavy-lidded eyes. She saw him in her narrow kitchen, savoring a cream puff, the finest confection Mrs. Sweetie sold in the shop. Laura was walking up to him, her arms begging for a lift, and he was holding her, with an ease Pete had never managed. He turned to face Virginia. *One more? Sure I'd love to have one more*, he was saying. And then, watching him lick the cream from his lips, she was out.

Hours might have passed. Days. She found herself on a stretcher. She heard others talking. "How are you feeling?" someone was saying—to her, it seemed. She tried to answer but her voice seemed beyond her control, as if it were at the end of her fingertips. She heard, as if from a distance, "I'm okay."

She was asked if she could sit up. She fell back.

She could not believe the nurse's words, that just five minutes had passed.

“Can I eat now? Crackers?” she asked. The nausea was worse.

The nurse went to get her some but before she returned, Virginia was vomiting into a mustard-colored basin.

When she was strong enough, she dressed and made her way to the recovery room. Through the open door, she had a view of the long hallway that led to the reception room where she had first filled out forms. Women were standing; some sitting on the floor. “Tuesdays are a light day,” the woman on the phone had said. “You should see Saturdays.”

In the recovery room, a table was stocked with already-opened cans of ginger ale and packs of Saltines, a half-empty coffee maker surrounded by torn pink packets, as if for a church reception that was already underway. She poured ginger ale into a paper cup and sat down in one of only two empty seats.

Eleven. It was only eleven. Two hours to spare. To rest so she could make it to the #6 train, then to the bus to Flushing. To Laura’s school. The pick-up in the schoolyard, where the other mothers—holding babies or pushing strollers—would be waiting, talking about arrangements for trick-or-treating. Mrs. Connelly, in her high, musical voice, asking Virginia, in her usual way, *How’s everything?*

“How are you managing?” came a different voice now, a smoker’s voice. It was the woman in the red turtleneck, taking the seat beside Virginia’s, her face shiny and whiter than any ghost. She took Virginia’s hand on the arm rest and held it with both hands, the way Virginia had once done for Laura when she had been side-swiped by a car.

It’s over, she told herself. But she was keenly aware of the lie. Next year, and each year on this day, when she lit a candle in the Jack-o-lantern, dressed Laura in her

costume, donning the usual sheet of a ghost for herself, she would remember, keeping track of the years, wondering what the child's face would have looked like. Round with fair eyes like Laura's and Virginia's? Or a deep oval with gypsy eyes like Pete's? The thickening of the hair, the growing acuteness of vision and steadiness of the steps, all the changes that would have come at each stage.