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AFTER THE ACCIDENT

by

Leah Fretwell

Jane was lying on her back, her legs and one of her hands severed from her body, her head crooked on an open neck. There were voices hovering above her and sirens rushing towards her, and a boy with a black-and-white-striped t-shirt crying for his mother somewhere beyond her left ear. The sky flickered in and out of focus. There were no stars; she wished there were stars. One of her eyes must have melted out of its socket; the other must have been blinded by the sudden light. Everything glowed. For a moment she thought, *Finally, heaven*, but she knew she was not dead yet, because she could still feel blood moving from her body and flooding the pavement. It was staining the white dress she'd purchased earlier that day. All day she'd regretted spending so much money on it, but she did not regret it now. She was annoyed with herself for ruining it so quickly, that was all.

I am in shock, she thought. *I must be*. The last time she'd been injured at all was years ago when she was ten (eleven? She couldn't quite remember), and her mother still made her wear white tights to church and would not let her shave her legs. Thick black hair poked through the fabric. Even the priest stared, distracted from

the psalms, and the girls in Sunday school were unforgiving. Still, her mother wouldn't budge. "You're a child," she insisted, "not a cheap whore." But her mother spent her days smoking menthols and making bets on boxing matches and never noticed what Jane was doing. One day, bored and tired of being laughed at, Jane locked herself in the bathroom and took her grandfather's straight razor, a long blade tucked between his shaving cream and a bar of unused soap. She worked at her legs slowly, one foot planted in the tub, one foot resting on the bath mat. On the left leg she accidentally nicked herself, a short red mark on her skin, and then she could not stop herself from extending the line, blood blooming across the white tile floor. She wrapped her leg in a towel and limped out of the bathroom to show her mother. Her mother screamed, red-faced, the cigarette between her fingers dropping to the floor, and she cursed her womb for bearing such a child and told Jane she was going to hell.

Was she going to hell? She didn't know. She cut people off in traffic. She cheated at Yahtzee. Sometimes she stole Post-It notes from work. She'd borrowed *Sex and the City* season five from a friend and never returned it. Once she'd left a stick of gum as a tip. She didn't think she'd really mind going to hell. Besides the heat and the company, how bad could it be, really? She hadn't prayed since she was fifteen. She wondered briefly if she should pray now but decided against it. If God hadn't minded her ignoring him all these years, he wouldn't mind now. If he had, one prayer wouldn't change his mind. After all, she'd done some shitty things. Lied to her parents. Showed up drunk to her sister's bridal shower. Laughed at her grandmother's open casket. Her aunties had decided to dress the body in a yellow muumuu with pink bows at the sleeves. Who does

that? And—Jane’s forehead creased—who would dress her for her funeral? She decided to shoot off a short prayer, despite her earlier resolve. *Please God*, she prayed, *Please God let it not be my mother.*

Lights were flashing, a disorienting blue and red blur in her dimming right eye. Men and women in dark blue and yellow crowded the pavement and made loud, angry noises. She could not feel her body anymore, she did not know if she still had a body, and she did not mind the sensation. Someone covered her with a blanket and everything was dark. The paramedic working over her saw her chest push the blanket in and away, in and away. A small circle of spit stained the fabric around her mouth, fresh and wet. He pulled the sheet off of her face and tried to get her to speak.

Jane looked up.

It was a young guy, or at least she thought it was. He was a stroke of gold and blue and gray. He was solicitous in a way that irritated her, patting her shoulder lightly, asking if she was in pain. He touched her remaining hand.

“Ma’am,” he said, “Ma’am, everything will be alright. I’m right here with you.”

He was earnest and concerned. He brushed her hair from her forehead. “Can you speak to me? What’s your name?”

Jane opened her mouth and breathed out her last word.

“Bullshit.”

The man paused, his hand still on her shoulder. “W—what?”

Jane rolled her good eye and let go.