

TWO GIRLS STARING AT THE CEILING LUCY FRANK

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Summary: In this novel in verse, two very different girls bond while hospitalized for Crohn's disease.

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Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

For Peter, again, as always

Contents



How to Read This Book

In this book, you will see a line on many pages. The line represents the curtain that separates the hospital beds of the main character, Chess, and her roommate, Shannon. The two girls talk to each other, mostly through the curtain. When the curtain is open, or Chess is no longer in the room, the line disappears.

Depending on your reading device, the appearance of the line representing the curtain will be different. On larger devices, the line will appear down the center of the page. In these cases, the story is meant to be read across each page, rather than down two separate columns. On smaller devices the line will appear to the side of the text—on the right for Chess's narration and on the left for Shannon's. On older devices, the line will not appear at all.

ER

The faces on the pain chart wear numbered bow ties.

Zero has a dimwit smile.

Ten's eyes trickle tears.

"Put ten. They'll take us faster."

Mom's face

would be off the chart

if they measured fear.

A gray-faced woman cradles her belly. A cougher fights to catch his breath.

A baby screams.

What number?

Four Face is like: Um, is there a bathroom here?

Six ate a rancid clam.

Eight's ice cream fell off his cone.

"Big as a grapefruit by the time they found it," whispers the lady beside us. "And we're not talking the three-for-a-dollar kind." "Ow! Owww!"

a girl's voice behind us wails.

"Owwwww! This is getting really bad!"

What number? Higher?
So they'll take us sooner? Lower?
So I can be sure
they'll let me go?

"Hey!" the girl yells.

"I'm in pain here, people!

I been sitting in this chair since two a.m.

"And don't be pretending
you don't know me!
I saw that *Oh shit it's Shannon* look
before you went all blank and bland and shit!"

The gray-faced woman groans.

The baby thrashes in its mother's arms.

Everyone moves farther

from the coughing man.

"Chess, sweetie. Let me do the paperwork."

Mom's cuticle is bleeding.

If I say five,

will they let me go?

"And don't give me some little med student!

The last guy swore

those pills would work,

and look at me!"

If we don't look, will the girl stop screaming?

Not even six a.m. I dressed for work.

If they take me next,

I might not be late.

"Yo! I'm a walking pain chart, if I could even walk, which I'm in too much pain, which you would see if you'd take the fuckin' time to fuckin' LOOKIT ME!"

The old lady holding the girl's hand sees Mom wince, throws her a mortified, scared sigh.

Paid today.

Birthday next week.

Boston trip

to look at colleges.

They could say
it was a freak, a fluke,
too much hot sauce, too many pickles,
mixing marshmallows with beer.

"Francesca Goodman?

Vomiting, diarrhea, passing blood?"

asks the nurse who takes my blood,

my temp, my pulse.

Or the thousands of raspberries I've been eating.

Eight and a half?

Fourteen?

Ninety-three?

"Is it a dull ache? A burning, stabbing, cramping, searing pain?
When did it start?
Is it constant or does it come and go?"

If I don't tell anyone,
I can forget it happened.

If I can forget it happened, I'll never have to tell.

"How're you doing, Francesca?"
The doctor's face so kind
I almost cry.
"Not too good," I say.

"Yo! You better save me, Doc! Cuz your ugly face is not gonna be the last thing on this earth I see!"

The spindle-limbed, stub-haired girl cuts dragon eyes at me—

"Who the fuck you lookin' at?"—

before we're both wheeled away.

Green scrubs blue scrubs white coats push park poke ID band IV tube toss terms start with C end w/ scopy CT catheterize colon chronic conservative clinical corticosteroids colonoscopy

"Excuse me. Did you say steroids?

Because my performance could use

a little enhancement these days."

Monitor Me, floating somewhere near the ceiling, hears my voice, too shrill, too chipper,

As peering docs see no Me, just belly.

"I'm a runner, you know."

With legs lovely as an antelope, he said.

"I don't want big ugly bulgy muscles, though.

Will this kind of steroids give me—"

"Don't worry," says the doc, whose shaved head shimmers in the fluorescent light.

"Those are anabolic steroids.

This is a different drug entirely to suppress inflammamma ...

high dose shortest possible to minimimize ...

"Okay then, Mom.

It's best if you step out now.

So, Francesca, we're just
going to insert a little tube—"

Monitor Me says run, run fast, run now.

Then somehow makes me find my mom a smile.

With her last small wave as the door closes,

Even the wings

David drew

On my hand around

his number

Seem

to fade.

"Relax try to relax just relax.

Don't worry. I have a special trick to make it slide down easy does it that's a good girl swallow swallow sip and swallow relax it will be much easier if you—

"Hold her arms for me, will you, please, Linda."

I beg fight beg
for breath fight
gag choke drown
as he wiggles
stuffs bores
the tube
in
up
down
my nose

Invades

me

deeper

deeper....

Jump back
to the French café,
where just last week
the scary-smart alumna lady
said you were so bright, so poised,
impressively well prepared.

Skip past
the latte making you feel
like a woodpecker was drilling
through your stomach,
the almond croissant
you knew was not a good idea.

Forget
days curled
on the nurse's cot,
nights hunched
on the bathroom floor.

Conjure

the sweet tang
of raspberries,
tanned arms,
dark eyes,
hair streaked
all goldy by the sun.

Flash

to Bri and Lexie
and that flushed, fizzy,
laughing-at-nothing,
something's-aboutto-happen feeling:

"Chess, what's up with the sudden interest in produce?"

"It's not the produce she's interested in. It's the meat!"

"Shut up, Lexie!

Don't look now, Chess!

He's oogling you

the way you oogle

his raspberries."

"It's ogle, not oogle."

"Uh-uh. The way Chess does it, it's a definite oogle."

"Chess, how many trips to the farm stand are we gonna have to make before you say hi?"

"Chess! It's Berry Boy!

Mr. Sugar Snap!

What's he doing at this party?"

"Don't call him that!"

"Then go ask him his name. Look at him there, all alone with his guitar." "Chess. Remember

the Plan."

"Aren't you glad now
I loaned you my dress?"

"You ask him, Bri."

"Me? Chess,
I'm not the one
he thinks is hot."

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it? Your throat might feel a little sore till you get used to it."

The doctor tapes the tube to my nose.

Tells me what a good girl I am.

- Deep blue, with silver stars, the longest nails I've ever seen run the elevator.
- Whatever this pain stuff is, it's working great. "I love your nails," I think I say.
- "Thought you was supposed to be off," says green jacket pushing my bed.
- Nail lady snorts, presses B. Cab-drivered through a bed traffic jam, IV bags
- dangle squiddish in the chilly light. "Could I get another blanket, please?"
- Wheeled into dim room with fun-house tunnel. Offloaded. Need to pee.
- Through whirring murk: "How's moo shu sound? I could go for a little
- moo shu pork today." "Excuse me, is there a restroom I could use first?
- And another blanket would be good." "Thought you're on a diet, Kenny.
- Plus, Tiny wants Chinese." "Tiny always wants Chinese. We had Chinese
- yesterday." "How you doing, hon? Hangin' in? We'll have you out
- quick as we can. Speaking of diet, d'you hear Kimberly's expecting?
- And you said she was just packing on the pounds. Hold your breath
- now, sweetheart. Don't breathe. Okay. Breathe."
- Not easy with this tube clogging my nose,

filling my throat. "Do you see anything?

Can you tell me what's wrong with me?

Is it something you die of?"

Why don't they hear me?

"Almost done now,

don't worry. Kenny,

we haven't had Italian

in a while. How 'bout

some pasta? Okay!

Last one, hon!

Doin' good!

Big breath

now.

Hold

your

breath.

Okay.

Breathe."

 ${\sf S}$ miley-face balloons

ask how I am

not too bad

except my teeth

weigh too much

to move my mouth

this bed's a raft

floating so far

from who I am

my head can't grab

onto the how.

One good thing:

if I die,

and David tells,

I'll never know.

FIRST DAY

Wheeled into a fluorescent world of two
TVs on brackets, two nightstands, tray tables,
wall panels bristling with gizmos, wires,
monitors above two vacancies
where beds should be.

No, wait.

Green curtains hide a third bed farthest from the door.
Who's moaning
on the other side?

I'll take the spot closest to the door, by the bathroom, I try to say.

But before my tongue's organized organized, my bed's pushed into the middle.

Up against those
cream-of-pea-green
lima-bean-green
Nile-bile-algae-vile
slimy-toxic-waste-green curtains.

And curtains close around me, too.

Good morning afternoon good evening how we doing time to check your temp your pressure your IV take you for that test get some blood hang a new IV sweetheart cookie lovey honey mi amor. Meanwhile, one by one, gross green bubbles glub up from my insides, slip down the tube. Bedpan:

Let's

not			
go			
there.			

"Let's talk about happy things," Mom says.

"Like that pistachio ice cream
with the cherries we always get
at Moon Palace for your birthday,
not that I'm saying that's where
we should go. Plus from what the doctor's
telling me, you probably shouldn't eat
the nuts anymore, or the cherries,
or ice cream, for that matter.
We should pick someplace special
this year.

I mean, I can't believe you'll still be in the hospital next week, though if you are ... I mean ... we'll just ... bring the party here.

"You hear me? Chess?

Chessie?"

Pour of moon on water, sting of breeze, soft sway of waves rock rocking us.

Who wouldn't fall for a boy

Who adds, "And that was antelope, not cantaloupe."

Who says, "Even in the dark you have the brightest eyes."

Says it like he's never even thought those words about a girl.

Was it just last night, that throbbing party lit with lanterns? That pine tree where he strummed Spanishy melodies so haunting I forgot the pain chewing through my belly as we walked into the shadows till we heard the water, and David said, "Whoa! Did you see those wings? Bet you anything it's an owl!" And in a thrum of tree frogs we followed the flash of white through a Queen Anne's lace-y meadow to a fence. his hands fizzed my skin as he lifted me over, we tiptoed past one sleeping house, another, to the rocks sloping to the water's edge, untied the canoe,

kicked off flip-flops.... "Yeah, no drove her up to Albany like four a.m. Room five sixteen." Mom's voice floats in, drifts out again. "Yeah, no out of the blue so healthy no, no I know all that weight but I assumed

I mean we ran together almost every day not that / lost a single ..." I fight to keep her words from gibbering, My mind from jumbling. "I know like best friends nothing she doesn't tell me ..."

"Mom?

What are you doing?"

"Just making a few phone calls.

I already sent out an email
letting everyone know."

"Know what?

Mom. You're not ..."

Each word the tube rasps my throat.

"Brianna's mom said Bri and Lexie have been so worried they can't reach you, wondering what happened."

The weight
of the unspoken
presses me deeper
in the bed.

"Mom, you're not saying anything to anyone, not telling them to come here, right?

Please! Just tell them

I'll be fine!"

And I can't tell if this buzzy jigging
as I stare at the cellulite-dimpled squares
on the ceiling is drip-dripping steroids
rip-roaring to the rescue
this kind of steroids makes people weird
that young nice nurse said
almost everyone gets fat

"Oh look how cute
with those round cheeks
Chubby Chessie Chess the Chunk
Don't listen to them, sweetie. You—
Right, Mom. I have a beautiful face.
You do. You just happen
to have gotten my genes.
Yeah. Size 14!
What? Chessie, I was never a 14!
And you were never bigger

than a 10!"	
Please, God,	
don't let me get fat again	
just when I thought	
I knew	
this body	
I've trained	
toned	
scrutinized	
compared	
So sure	
I could caffeinate	
sleep Advilize	
sweet-talk muscle	
mind over matter	
this body I thought	
I mostly	
almost liked	
or at least	
didn't totally	
loathe.	

And for those hours	
minutes	
last night	
oh	
"Shhh. Try to relax, sweetie.	
Let the medicine do its job."	

 \mathbf{W} as it just

last night

David said,

"Would you be sad

if our owl turned out

to be a seagull?"

as we slid the boat

into the lake and rowed

to an island that turned out

to be a rock barely

big enough for two?

Said: "Uh ... how're

we gonna get back

from here?" as we watched

the boat drift off

into the water lilies?

Said: "Do we care?

Maybe, but not now, right?"

Said he wished

he had his guitar

so he had something

to do with his hands?

Then we both talked too much, too fast, to talk away the awkwardness.

Pointed out
bogus constellations,
agreed we're so not
party people,
only came, in fact,
because his dad lives
just down the road,
and my friends
decided we needed
to get out more,

And I told him
I wished I could
drive a tractor
and sell raspberries
all summer,
not plug numbers

into a spreadsheet at Mom's ex-boyfriend's accounting firm,

And my mind leaped
with summer things
we'd do together,
and though the breeze
smelled like rain,
the rock was rough and pointy,
and the bugs were biting,
I couldn't imagine ever
being sad again.

And by the time the thumping bass beats from the party faded and lights winked out around the lake, pain nibbled at my belly, but his hands let me forget, we warmed each other against the night, and if the owl flew by, my eyes were too melted with his kisses

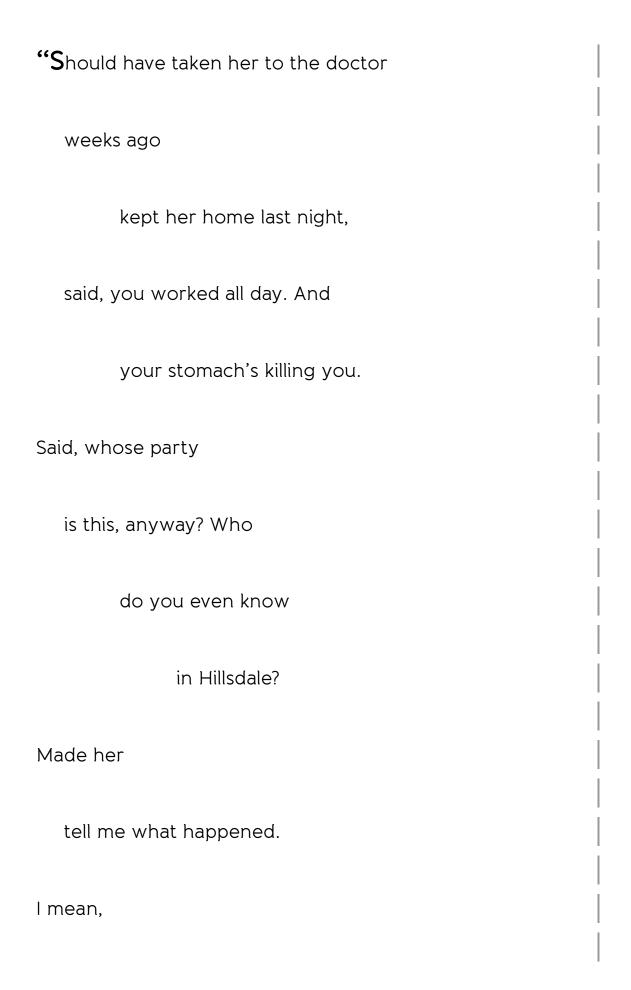
to see.

And when he said:

"I can't think of anything to say that isn't totally corny," I'd have answered "Say it anyway,"

Except a boa constrictor
was squeezing my breath away
a shark was ripping
my insides,

And I tried so hard
to hold on
not let him see
not let him know
not stop
not spoil
hold on.



no	phone	no wallet
ΙO	priorie	no waner

no underpants?"

Under the covers
I hold my hand
as if it's his.

How bad

could I have been

if I remembered

we needed to go back
and get his guitar?

Skin white as the fat on a leg of lamb, white scarf over no hair, eyelids waxy as a corpse ...

Here in the night, the only lights the flickering fluorescence of her machines, my call button's LED.

Her sheeted chest

flutters ...

flutters ...

doesn't.

"The lady in the bed by the window?"

I tell the intercom. "She was like twitching and moaning before, but I think she may have stopped breathing.

"No, no. I'm not out of bed.
But I can't seem to sleep,
so I've been watching
through the curtain.

"No. Wait! She just twitched again.

And cleared her throat.

Yeah. Yeah.

It's okay. She's okay!"

I let the curtain drop, sink into the safety of my bed. "Sorry to bother you. She's fine.

She's on the phone."

"Sam? Do you know where my shoes and stockings are?"

Voice a scrape, a creak, a raven's croak:

"Sam, my cab's waiting!

No! They're not under the bed!

I looked!"

"Hello, Halberstam, it's me, Mrs. Klein.

I need you to come with the affidavit.

Tell Sam to bring the blue valise.

And the passport.

"Sam, it's me again.

I'm not supposed to be here, Sam.

Sammy, there's been some mistake.

Without the passport

they won't let me leave."

When I was little, keeping watch in the night, counting cars could sometimes keep away the night beetles.

I watch the darkness, listen to silence, until a nurse's light glimmers through the curtain:

"You sure you weren't dreaming, hon? I never heard Mrs. Klein say a word."

When I was little,
waiting for the night to end,
my dad's flashlight was enough

to scare away the night beetles.

There are no lights here.

No sound but the bubbling hum of her oxygen machine.

Nothing to count

but the glub
of the drain,
and the drugs
silently marching
down the tube
into my arm.

SECOND DAY

Morning is the time to sleep, dreaming my old dreams:

Hot backseat love with someone who turns out

To be Mr. Mooney, the custodian.
Why are the SATs in Chinese?

My cell's dropped in the toilet, and it's ringing and I've lost my keys.

Welcoming those *Not that again!* dreams like an old familiar *Seinfeld*,

While carts rattle, mops slap, conversations filter in

Like sun striping through the blinds.

Do I dream four frowning docs in shower caps,

Young blue-scrubbed docs filing in like a line of ducklings to gather round my bed?

Could the "patient" person they're talking about be me?

"You know, everyone's saying what a great patient you are,"
Mom says as she unpacks
my pillow, socks, the afghan
Nana crocheted for me,

Plugs in my electric toothbrush, stacks the as-yet-unopened books from the AP English summer reading list on the tray table beside my bed.

"I told them I'd expect nothing less.

Even when you were little,
when you got your shots,
it was me who cried,
even if I never let you see."

Sweet coffee kiss, soft hiss of drawers opening and closing, rustle of papers.

My eyes haze.

I let her words blur till

"... told Bri you weren't quite ready for her to go get you raspberries but—"

"What? No! Mom! Don't let her go there. And I can't see anyone! Mom! No! Tell her no!"

"Okay, sweetie.

Go back to sleep.

It's gonna take me an hour

to get to work.

I'd better go."

"Mommy, no!

Don't leave me!"

"You'll be fine.

And it will all be fine.

My strong, precious girl."

" \mathbf{O} y, so young!"

"With all those tubes and not a word of complaint"

"I wonder what"

"Peeked at her chart. It doesn't"

"Such a pretty name, Francesca."

"Such a sweet face"

"But so skinny. Vey iz mir."

No faces for the voices

till a green jacket man pushes my bed

toward the door and I see four stout ladies
in beauty-parlor-perfect wigs
and dresses too hot for July
spraddle-legged on the window seat
behind Mrs. Klein,
next to nectarines, cottage cheese,
hard-boiled eggs, pocketbooks.

The *tsk* chorus follows
as he wheels me past a boy
in an Ichabod Crane black
coat and hat, sleeping openmouthed
by the door.

"Where are they taking her?"

"Tests. Always more tests."

"Heshy! Move your chair so they can get through!"

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"No need to raise your voice.
I understand, my love.
You're a little upset.
But now you're in your nice new
room, so let's just get you into bed,
okay, cookie?"
"You understand shit! I am not your love.
And I'm no damn Chips Ahoy!, either!
NO ONE puts their hands on me,
you GOT that, cookie?"
"I'm just trying to be nice."
"Do I look like I need nice?
What I NEED is for you to stop shuffling
me around like some kinda luggage.
Then I need you to leave
me the HELL alone.
Which goes for you, too,
whoever the hell you are.
You think I don't see you
peeping at me through the curtain?
WHAT? No one around here's
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ever seen a bitch on steroids?"

I shrink into my covers,
let the clanging buzzing roaring
in my head drown her roars,
until the curtains part, and

IV pole tangled with tubes,
eyes almost swallowed
in her man-in-the-moon face.

the lollipop-head, dragon-eyed, puff-bellied emergency room girl flops down in my chair and tucks up paper-slippered feet too big for her tiny body.

Says, "Hope you're not planning on sleeping anytime soon. No way I can sleep with all this shit they got me on.
You're not a moaner, are you?
First room they had me in, the lady

whined and carried on all night."

Hair patchy, dry, like doll hair cut with kindergarten scissors.

"I used to be hot, if you can believe that.

Till they gave me the evil juice.

Saves your life and makes you wish

you were dead.

Know what I'm saying?"

Eyes too old for a girl jump from the tube in my arm to the bags on my IV pole.

She snorts a laugh.

"I guess you do.

Welcome to the club.

Not that I give a shit about being hot.

Hot's a pain in the ass. Not that you'd know. Just joking. You're still looking pretty good. How long you been in?

Hey! You're not closing your eyes?
Want some of my Jell-O, or an icey?
I scared that nurse so bad
she gave me three.
Oh, right. No food for you
with that NG tube.
They didn't dare stick one
down my nose this time.
How much evil juice
they pumping into you?"

"I don't know."

My voice floats in from a distant galaxy.

"You didn't ask?"

A line of earrings studs one ear.

A cross dangles from the other.

"Act like a wimp, they tell you *nada*.

You know, you look like shit.

We should get the nurse."

"It's okay. I'm okay. Really.

I don't want to bother them."

I need her to understand this is not me, this person lying here with patient hair (back squashed flat, top like rooster feathers) two patient gowns (one frontwards, one backwards, to keep the world from my bare butt)

Even as the steroids rampaging through my veins make my blood roar as she glares her dragon glare.

"Hello! Nurse! There's a girl in here could use some help!

Are we gonna get some help, or do I need to come out there and mess you up?"

"So an octopus
walks into a bar
and asks for a beer."
Poppy, too loud,
is laughing in advance
as the girl's voice booms
through the curtain.

"Yo. News flash, Doc!
You don't have to talk so slow.
I'm not five. Or stupid.
Just sick. Remember?
"Bet you remember the career advice
I gave you last time, too. How you
should be one of those coroner guys,
like on CSI and shit.
"I mean, if you're this bad
with people, do us all a favor.
Switch to corpses."

Nana bustles, fusses, reaches for the clicker.

"Would you like to watch a little TV, Cupcake?"

"Barb, I'm in the middle of the joke! Unless you've heard it, Chessie."

"Steve, it's not the dirty one?"

"No, Nana. It's fine."

I summon up a smile.

"I always like this one."

Nana, smelling of Chanel smoothes back my hair.

"The earrings look just lovely!

I'm so glad we didn't

wait for your

birthday to— Oh, my goodness!

Is that a—

I don't know what you

call them these days.

In our day we called them hickeys."

"She's about to be seventeen years old, Barb. You ask me, it's high time she had a boyfriend. Right, Chessie?"

On our island, David asks:

"So do you have a boyfriend?"

When I say, "No. Not really,"

he answers, "Awesome!"

And by moonlight and the flashlight app on my cell phone, scribbles on my hand.

"How'm I FEELING, Doc?

'Bout time someone

in this shithole asked me that.

"How the HELL YOU THINK I'M FEELING?"

"She's got some mouth on her, that little girl. How old

```
do you think—"
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"Nineteen, not that it's your business, and I got ears, too, lady! And a name. Shannon Elizabeth Williams. So if you got something to say to me ..."

"Okaaay! Here's
one you haven't heard."
Poppy's back in hearty mode.
"So what did Buddha
say to the hot dog vender?"

"OWWW!"

"I haven't touched you yet!"

"Make me one with everything!"

"And you better not ... OWWW!"

"Why do you always have to give me such a hard time?

Why can't you be more like

this nice little girl next to you?" "You mean all meek and shit?" "No, just pleasant. She's not feeling any better than you are, but she always manages a thank-you and a smile." "Cuz her evil juice hasn't worked its magic yet. Just wait. You'll see." "What is she talking about, evil juice?"

"What do you think's wrong with that little girl? I understand she's upset, but rude like that?

There's no excuse—"

"Frankly, I'm more worried about Chessie. How're you doing, there, Cupcake? You've been awfully quiet."

Poppy leans in for a kiss.

"Anything we can get you before we go?"

Or bring next time?"

"I'm fine," I tell them, telling myself the lump clogging my throat is just the tube.

"I promise. I'll be fine."

"Knock, knock!

We were here to see Jared's dermatologist, so we thought we'd pop in and say hi."

"Ma, I think she's sleeping," Jared whispers.

Jared from the sandbox,
from the school bus,
Jared destined to be valedictorian,
whose dad is our dentist,
who Mom, I know, wishes
was my boyfriend,
who before—No! Don't
let yourself even
think of David—
my friends swore
I was doomed
to marry, saying,
the good news is,
you'll get free dental care.

"Ma, come on," says Jared.

"Let's just go."

And even through closed eyes
I can see how I must look to him.

"I just want to say one thing.

Chessie, honey," says Mrs. Kaye.

"A girl at work has what your mom said you might have, and as long as she avoids stress and gets plenty of rest, she's fine."

I squeeze my eyes tighter. Wait for them to go away. "So, the immune system as I'm sure you know, protects the body from viruses, bacteria and other ..."

She's so cool, this doctor in the orange Crocs, with the glasses I'd get if I needed glasses, corkscrew hair miraculously pinned up with a pencil,

"... foreign organisms.

Sometimes, however,

the cells supposed to fight enemies

can turn on your own body.

We call this ..."

Talking to me like
I'm just as cool,
as smart. I wonder
if my hair's curly enough
to curl like that. I love

her engagement ring, so not flashy, yet so sparkly. I wonder

"... autoimmunity.

Researchers think certain bacteria, viruses, toxins, and drugs trigger an autoimmune response in people genetically susceptible ..."

If she's noticed my new diamond studs.

"Most autoimmune disorders, unfortunately, are chronic.

But many, I'm glad to say, can be very successfully controlled with treatment.

In your case, most likely inflammatory bowel disease, also known as Crohn's disease, your immune system appears to be attacking healthy cells in your terminal ileum.

"Francesca. Chess.

Am I throwing too much at you?

Do you have any questions

you'd like to ask?"

"No. Not really.

I was just wondering ...

would you mind telling me ...

what product

you use on your hair

to get it to curl like that?"

Forget

a little light reading to take my mind off things.

Lotions, cute cartoons, pretty notebook for my thoughts, flowers to brighten up the place.

Give those to this Shannon girl, the sick girl, with nothing on her table but a sippy straw.

Bring me my running shoes, a black bikini, a bottle of sriracha, a kite, a Bernese mountain dog,

chandelier earrings that throw sparks in the light, a ticket to Machu Picchu.

When the nurse comes, pleasant as I can, I tell him no more visitors.

None. I don't want to see or talk to anyone.

One good thing: Looks like I lost my phone. Blared from sleep, I almost rip the IV needle from my vein, grabbing the red-flashing bedside phone before my clanging heart can stop me.

"Chess!"

It's Lexie:

"I'm so upset you're sick!

Are you okay?

Are you any better?

Your mom just said—"

"We waited and waited

for you."

Bri's on, too:

"We met no one, needless to say,

and when you didn't text or call,

we figured you were still

with Berry Boy,

and when my dad came

to get us ..."

"This is not, like, our fault, is it?"

"No. It was fine."

Monitor Me hates
the quiver in my voice
as I picture wide-eyed,
stork-legged Lexie,

Bri, elf-small with rowdy black hair.

"And I am so much better.

Seriously.

No worries.

I'll be fine."

"You know, I knew something was up with you!
I mean, cramps are supposed to be once a month, right?
And that mono that wasn't mono

last winter? And quitting choir.

Which you love? Telling Mr. Jensen you wouldn't try out for Ophelia, which you could have gotten, especially with that whole ethereal thing you've got going lately—"

"And we finally get an invite to Ruby's pool party and you refuse to go?

If it wasn't for that crush on Mr. Sugar Snap, we wouldn't have gotten you out of the house all summer."

"But something good
happened, right?
Something as in *Something*.
Or you'd have come back to the party.

I know this isn't the ideal time to talk about it, but
I mean, did you guys,
you know ..."

"Chess? It's kinda silent on your end.

Is your mom there?"

"Umm. Yes."

Lying to them,
for the first time ever,
to drive the night beetles away.

Between the curtains

I watch two ladies sit

with Shannon as she sleeps.

Hear click of knitting needles, rustle of starched legs crossing and uncrossing.

"See all them earrings?" the older one tells an aide hanging a new bag of medicine.

"She's got one for every surgery."

"Seriously?" The aide looks impressed.

Or shocked. "That's a lot of surgeries
for a young girl."

"Oh yeah. And that little cross in the other ear? That's to keep her from any more."

The older one counts stitches on something pink, crinkles open a starlight mint, sighs, Hands another to the heavy, younger one, whose name necklace might say *Yvonne*.

When I wake up,
a baby hat is almost done.
The older lady stabs her needles
through the ball of yarn.

"Seems like they gave her a double dose of sedative this time." She hauls herself to standing,

Untangles tubes on the IV pole, smoothes the comforter, the pillow, the girl's jagged hair.

"Not sure how soon
we can get back, kiddo."
Yvonne leaves the mint
on Shannon's pillow,
bends to kiss her forehead.

So close to me that if she knew
I was watching through the curtain,
she could pull it aside and kiss me, too.

In a dream David sets my lips tingling with his eyes, even in the dark.

"I really want to kiss you.

Is it okay if ..."

"MWAAH!"

Stubble scrapes my cheek.

"Heyyy! How're you doing,

Chessie Chestnut?"

Strawberry-slick lips brush my forehead.

"Hello, sweetie.

You weren't sleeping,

were you?"

"Huh?

Oh, hi, Aunt Dawn.

Hey, Uncle Charlie.

I'm doing fine."

"Because, sweetie,

I just want to tell you

the woman down the street
has what they're saying
you might have,
and as long as she stays away
from certain foods ..."

In neon running shoes I race through sand, sprint through the rainbow droplets of a sprinkler, run straight up a waterfall,

Shoot out a purple cloud
of squid ink so no one
can see me jetting
through the ocean
on You'll never catch me! bubbles.

"Genetic. I looked it up online.

Cousin Joanie had it.....

Wouldn't surprise me a bit

if Uncle Bobby ..."

Now if I can just stay

inside the dream.

"Dawn. Why make her upset? Nobody's said for sure—"

Blur their voices.

"They know something's very wrong. I'm no doctor and I could tell she wasn't well for months ..."

But Bri's and Lexie's words creep in like beetles:

"That time you ate the entire bottle of my dad's Tums ..."

"My dad's single malt to kill the pain ..."

"Julia's sleepover where you spent

the whole night in the bathroom ..."

"Why does everyone in this family think if you don't talk about things, if you just smile and don't look, or look polite they'll, like, miraculously ..."

"Dawn's right, Chessie.

You had to have known
you were—"

"And I get that you must have been hoping it would go away—"

"Or trying to protect your mom-"

"Right. God forbid

there should be something amiss in my sister's perfectly constructed perfect world!"

"But protecting?

By going for a swim
in the middle
of a freezing-cold night
in the pouring rain
with some boy who
she won't even tell
anyone his name?"

"That's not the issue now.
What's important is
finding out what's—"

"Not important?

Getting home at three in the morning?

Crying too hard to talk?"

"What happened, Chess?

I know you were sick,

but something must have happened!"

"Did that boy push you to do something you weren't ready for? Did he ..."

"If there was a, like, asteroid
headed for the Earth?"
pipes up Natasha Oldenburg
from fifth grade,
"And the only guy you could find
was, like, Mr. Flood, the septic tank man?
Would you do it with him?"

"What about Donald Trump?

SpongeBob SquarePants?

If you knew it was your

one and only chance to ever know ..."

"WHY DO YOU THINK SOMETHING 'HAPPENED'? "NOTHING HAPPENED!

AND IT WAS NOT RAINING!

AND IT DOESN'T

MATTER

ANYMORE

WHO

HE

WAS!"

My words boom

in my ears,

turn the air

Nile-bile-algae-vile

While David's words on that endless drive home echo in my head:

"You should have said something.

If you'd just said something ..."

And the night beetles swarm.

The nurse sets down a basin of warm water, soap, and paper towels to clean up for the night.

I ask her to help me scrub these damn wings off my hand. Somewhere in the clockless night, the sobbing starts, so quiet

I have to strain to hear, so terrible

I could believe it's me.

while on my other side

Mrs. Klein demands a cab,

her pocketbook, her shoes:

"Sam, my pearls were right here and now they're gone. Sammy, I told you that new cleaning girl would rob us blind...."

Then, from Shannon's side again, I hear,
"Do I really need another
crazy person?
Would somebody
shut her up
before I go
friggin'
ripshit here?"

Trapped between voices,

buzzing like a fluorescent
tube about to die, I buzz
for help, wait, buzz again,
wait, until, not sure which side
of the curtain creeps me out more,

I unplug my wires from the wall, inch my pole around to the old lady's side, and looking past her face, uncurl her hand.

Her nails bite my palm;

I want to flee. But from some forgotten corner of me in a voice that barely quavers, come the words I've wanted:

"It's gonna be all right.
We're here with you.
You're not alone."

Lizard eyes click open. "Who are you?

Where's Sammy?
You stole my clothes!"

"Me? No! No. Look at me.
I don't have clothes either.
We're in the hospital.
No one here has clothes."

"Gimme that phone!"

Scraggle-haired, red-eyed,

Shannon stands beside me,

turns thumb and pinky

into a phone.

"Hello, Sam?

It's me, Shannon.

"How're you doing tonight? So you know which shoes she wants, right?

And you'll be here in how long?

"No, half an hour's perfect, Sam.

Don't worry about a thing.

Mrs. Klein's doin' fine.

Just pick her out something

nice to wear, okay?

She's gonna want to look good

for going home."

Her voice gentles:

"Okay, Mrs. Klein,

he's on his way. But

traffic is terrible, he says.

So don't wait up.

He'll wake you

when he gets here.

"What's that, Sam?

Oh yeah, and he says

tell you he loves you."

Her voice wobbles as she adds,

"A bushel and a peck."

But Mrs. Klein's hand's

already eased in mine.

Her eyes flutter closed.

I stand by her bed listening to the oxygen machine till Shannon raises a hand to slap me five, and mutters
"Damn, I'm good.

"Hell, I should have told him to bring us a breakfast burrito while he's at it.

And some coffee."

Her eyes slide away.

"And underpants."

I know, I know, I know.
I nod too many times.
"Bring mine, too, Sam,"
I say into my
thumb and pinky phone.

With proud, sad, crooked smiles

we push our poles
back to our beds
to wait for sleep, or Sam.

THIRD DAY

Whap!

Just as the morning cart clatter starts, a box of tissues clips my ear.

"Case you feel like crying again."

"I won't!"

I sit up, chuck them back the way they came.

"Missed!"

"Oh, yeah?"

I toss my tissue box over as the vitals lady wheels in her vitals-checking machine.

"Ha! Ya missed!"

"You girls must be feeling better," she says, making sure my blood's still pumping before
I drift off again.

"No reason to think ...
every reason to believe ...
tough disease ... hard sometimes
to make a definitive ...
but the tests all indicate ...
chronic but these days ..."

Bald-head doctor's voice
too fast, too smooth,
too jolly, hearty, way too close,
drawing squiggly pictures of intestines
as Mom nods and peppers him
with questions I can't listen to.

I don't know
this hard and tough language.
Don't speak Disease.
And I am so tired,
I close my ears until he's gone,
and through the curtain Shannon mutters:

"Duh. I could've diagnosed her two days ago. You don't need to be a friggin' genius to know she's got Crohn's. Same as me. Crohn's. Inflammatory bowel-"

"Excuse me?"

C-words ricochet around my brain.

"You don't know me!

You know nothing about me or my ..."

My mouth runs screaming from the B-word.

"Mom. Could you see if this curtain closes any tighter?"

"Fine with me.

Who said I was even talking to you?

I'm just saying, it pisses me off,

these turkeys talking about tough.

They wouldn't know tough

if it bit them on their flabby ass."

```
"Let's talk about happy things,"
Mom says.
"So Lily won
her tennis tournament.
Julia's loving France.
Ruby's still rafting down the Snake,
but I know she'd love
to hear from you.
In fact, everyone's
calling, texting,
worried, wondering
when they can ...
In fact, Alexis said
if Brianna can get the car
they might be by."
"NO!
I TOLD YOU
I DIDN'T
WANT YOU TO ...
```

"MOM, DID YOU TELL

THEM THAT I HAVE ..."

A gross disease with even grosser names.

"TELL ME
YOU DIDN'T.
BECAUSE
I DON'T, OKAY?"

Shouting to drown the thrum of beetles.

"AND ... IF ANYONE
ASKS YOU ANYTHING
ABOUT ... you know ..."

My eyes touch my hand for wings

I know are gone.

"Chessie, you're acting like you did something bad.

Like this is some kind of terrible secret."

Every bubble snaking its way down the tube

It's true.

to the tub of gunk

clipped to my bed,

Each aching swallow reminds me of my gross green secret,

And I wish
I could tell her, wish
we were two different people
so I could tell her.

"You're sick, sweetie.

They're your friends.

They love you.

"Here. Text them. Talk to them.
You must have dozens of texts
waiting for you.

If you had your cell."

With a plump of the pillows and a kiss, Mom leaves me her phone.

"I'll bring the charger for you tomorrow."

"They could have mixed up my tests with Shannon's," I call after her.

"Or anybody's.

It's possible, right? Doctors
make mistakes all the time.

It's possible I don't have a disease at all."

A snort hmmphs through the curtain.

"Right. Little Miss Cupcake couldn't

have the same disease as Trailer Girl."

The Orange Croc Doc is barely through the door before I'm demanding a new room, no roommate, saying if I'm sick, it's sick of everybody thinking they know more about me than I do.

Saying loud enough
to drown out the TV's infuriating drone,
I'm the girl who always
makes the honor roll,
eats her veggies,
takes her vitamins,
runs every day.

I saved a rabbit from the neighbor's cat, rescued a turtle from the road.

If I hadn't run to get the EpiPen when Mom stepped on that yellow jacket nest, she would be dead.

And not just that.

I'm a junior lifesaver,
I took CPR....

So if there's any fairness in the world, I should be fine, not stuck here peeing in a bedpan, with bubbles glubbing out my nose,

on drugs
so I can't tell
what's me, what's them,
telling me about some
alleged disease....

Monitor Me hears my voice,
all whiny, huffy, pompous, prissy,
and as the Orange Croc Doc steps close,
worries the cabbage smell
I keep smelling
is in my head
or me.

Trying not to breathe
my nasty breath on her,
I tell her I am so, so sorry,
tell her these steroids
truly are evil juice,
tell her I have no time
to be sick.
Lily's winning
tennis tournaments,
Julia's biking through France,
Ruby's rafting ...

Let her know I've already lost the best thing I almost had ...

Make her see
I'd rather run
though the pain
than lose my body my mind.

"Hang in,"
the Orange Croc Doc says,
fingers on my pulse,

worry in her eyes.

"Steroid side effects
are notoriously challenging.
Often suck, in fact.
But they're a necessary evil
to get that immune system
of yours under control."

"Like I said.

Welcome to the club."

I shiver, twitch, long for something to barricade my ears, my brain,

As machines beep and wheeze and Mrs. Klein commands:
"Turn over, Sammy.
You're snoring, Sam."

And someone in another room moans, "Nuurse! Nuuuuuurrrrse!" and Shannon turns her TV loud, louder,

And I'm trying to hang in, trying to be pleasant, cooperative and pleasant, as I tell a doc, a nurse, an aide this isn't working for me.

I need another room.

And I know it's stupid to think no one will call me, see me, find me there, but even though I haven't heard a stir from Shannon's side in hours,

I tell them, "Get me out of here!"

"Poor you!"

"Look at you!

"I can't believe ..."

"Don't sit up, Chess. It's fine!"

All glowy tan in shorts and tanks, ponytails still wet from pool or gym, Lexie and Bri burst into my stale green-curtained den, and before I can warn them I've had nothing but a sponge bath since, well ... you know ... that night, I'm wrapped up in their arms.

"We couldn't decide
whether to bring like, reading matter,
or go with ..."
Bri ties a blue GET WELL balloon
to my IV pole, dumps
from her shopping bag
a box of pink Peeps bunnies,
rhinestone flip-flops,
a puzzle book,
a whiskery stuffed mouse.

"It's amazing what you can find at the ninety-nine-cent store.

Care for a four-month-old Peep?

Your mom said you can't have any food, but everyone knows

Peeps don't qualify."

"How're you feeling today?

Your mom said you gave her
a really bad—"

"Not that you look that sick. No.
Seriously. I mean your face
is a little poufy. And your eyes
look a little weird—"

Both carefully not staring at med bags, bedpan, tubes.

"So. Now that your mom's not here.

Does Chessie have a boyfriend?"

asks Bri, determinedly perky.

"You still haven't said

if you heard from him." "Or told us where he lives. Or where he goes to school. Or if he's, like, a farmer person." "Never mind that. Has he texted? Called?" Night beetles chitter in my ears. "No. And even if he wanted to ..." My eyes won't meet their eyes. My mouth won't shape his name. "... my phone's lying on the bottom of the lake." "What? What happened? What's that mean?" I can feel beetle feet creeping

closer.

"Does he know how sick you are?"

"Should we go out to Sugar Snap Farm and, like, reconnoiter?"

"No!

Please.

No!"

Sticky feelers flick my eyelids.

"Oh. By the way. I hate to bring this up now, but Jake is having a party next week, and hope, for some reason, springs eternal, so, not that I think you'll still be sick then, but if you could tell your mom I'm gonna need my dress back ..."

And I wonder what would happen if I didn't say, "No worries," Didn't assure them yes, of course, by then I'll definitely be fine, Tried saying, Listen. Something really bad happened with David. I can give you the money for the dress. But if I tell you, will you promise not to tell? But Monitor Me,

floating alongside
the blue balloon, sees
the scared in their smiles,

Like the smiles we smiled at Patrick Morrissey's sister when she came to third grade with her prosthetic arm, like we smiled at the dead-eyed ladies slumped in their wheelchairs, the year we sang holiday songs at the nursing home.

"Excuse me, ladies."

The nurse smiles, too,
as she sweeps the bedpan
off the chest of drawers,
announces, "Good news, Francesca!
We're giving you an upgrade!"
Returns with what looks like
an old lady's walker with a toilet seat
between its legs.

"Ta-da! Your new commode!

Enjoy!"

And they smile
till they leave
in a whoosh
of kisses, wishes,
and relief
that they're
not me and
they are
outta here.

And in the silence left by all the words unsaid, it's pretty clear

I've stepped off the edge of my life

Into Sickland.

No! I crank my bed up, slide feet into my new flip-flops, unplug, unsnarl, unhook my nose-tube tub, rehook the tubes to my IV pole, wrestle its wheels around the heinous commode.

No! There are no night beetles in the daylight,

Just spots dancing in the corners of my eyes.

And I'm walking, right?

Walking.

Tile by tile,
step after step,
past the doctors
leaving Shannon's bed.

Hang in, the Orange Croc Doc said.

That chitter in my ears

is just the hum

of the machines.

Or evil juice.

The face waiting in the bathroom mirror will not be me.

Only six

more tiles to go.

And who said I have to look? Just pee.

Stand clear of the mirror,
brush tongue, teeth, scrub armpits
with someone's Listerine,
rake hair into a lump,
no pencil like the Orange Croc Doc's
to hold it up, stab someone's toothbrush through,

twist tendrils till they agree to curl, pinch cheeks, bite color to my lips.

"I like the little peach-fuzzy hairs on your lip," he said.
"You're telling me I have a mustache."
"No. They're nice. I like the way they feel."

Now if I just climb up on the toilet,
I can see if my belly looks
as giant as it feels,
if the rest of me looks fat.

Please, God, not that!

If it weren't for all these stupid tubes tangling, and this damn balloon!

Oh, no!

Forget the pinpoint eyes, hair like roadkill,

skin like someone who's been floating facedown in a river for a month or two.

There's nothing in my nose.

Above me the blue balloon bobs.

Somewhere down my chest,
the tube with three greenish bubbles
caught in its coils.

"I don't know what happened,"
I tell the nurse who rushes
to the bathroom
when I ring.

She glares like I'm a dog who piddled on her floor.

"What do you mean, what happened?
You pulled it out.
Your doctor is not going to be pleased."

"No. It must have fallen out!

I WOULD NEVER ... I SWEAR!

I'M NOT THE KIND OF PERSON WHO ..."

And yet, do I know?

"How 'bout we give it a try without the tube," the Orange Croc Doc says.
"We'll put the tube back if we need to...."

"No! Please! No!"

She's talking blood counts, this rate, that rate, numbers I can't understand.

"Meanwhile, why don't I ask for someone to come down from psych so we can get you a bit more comfortable," she says, so brisk and tender with her corkscrew curls,

All I can do is nod and try to smile.

Tassel loafers,

clipboard, blue blazer,

laser-blue eyes:

"So I hear you're having a rough time.

What's up?"

He looks more college admissions officer than shrink.

I pull out my interview smile.

"Not much. Besides me, that is.

Sitting up.

In this chair, I mean.

Plus, I just took my first walk.

To the bathroom.

And my doctor says

I'm doing fine."

"That's good news. Now why don't you tell me what's been going on. Then we'll see what we can do

to make you more comfortable."

"Another pill?

Because, my theory?
I'm not that sick anymore.
It's just, no one has any clue
how I am, because of the drugs
they've got me on."

"That's an interesting theory, Francesca.

And we can talk about it.

But first we just need to get through
a few routine questions.

"Would you mind telling me what year it is?"

Would you mind telling me
why you're looking at me
the way they look at Shannon?
Not just like I might be
a crazy person,

But like I'm one of those tiny transparent guppies

Mom bought for me that swam in circles

for a day, then, belly-up, floated to ... abscess remission flare-up immuno-something treatment goals Doctor words I thought I hadn't heard flash like fireworks in my brain. "Francesca, can you tell me who's the president of the United States?" ... activation of immune system leads to influx of inflammatory cells

to the intestine once activated, the immune system doesn't shut off, resulting in chronic inflammation disturbs immune system's ability to distinguish between self and nonself ... "Francesca, would you be more comfortable lying down?" "NO! I mean, no, thank you." And I keep hanging on

by my politeness, giving him the answers he's looking for, until

Monitor Me hears my tiny transparent guppy voice ask: "If I do have whatever this is, am I going to die?"

The shrink sets down his clipboard. Leans in closer.

I watch his eyebrows knit,
his Adam's apple bob,
his lips tighten for an instant
before he speaks
of perfectly understandable concern,
normal to worry, not saying
there won't be challenges, but ...

I wait for Die? You?

Of course not!

Don't be ridiculous!

Wait through cautious, useless doctor words.

Wait for him to go.

"Doctor! Wait!

Come back!

"Like, for example, that girl in the bed next to me?

Her body is basically out to get her?

Hates her as much as she hates it?

That's what 'autoimmune' means?

"And 'chronic' means no matter how good she thinks she feels, it's got her? She's got it? She's.

It?

"Is that what everyone is saying?"

"Francesca," he says. "I can't speak to what others might have said, but I can assure you, no matter what disease you may or may not have, you'll still be you."

"But what's that mean?"

I've been trying to whisper in case Shannon's listening through the curtain, but his careful kindness cracks my voice wide open:

"Who's 'you' when your own body is your biggest enemy?

"If her own body can't recognize her, how can she?"

"You're asking important questions.

It might take a while
to figure out the answers.

But right now, I think
what we need to do

is give you something to calm your nerves and let you sleep."

"No! Doctor. You don't understand!

If I lie down and sleep,

if I die, I'll never know!"

"YO! NO DYING HERE! GOT THAT?"

Shannon's voice slices through the curtain.

"NOBODY DIES IN MY ROOM!
INCLUDING ME!"

"Leap, ladies! Leap over the lake!

Don't let those feet get wet!

Tummies in! Arms out!

Heads up!"

I soar above the mirror-shiny floor, land easy as a dragonfly. "Perfect!" Ms. Filipova bestows her chilly smile, whispers to my mom:

"Remember what a clumsy little girl she was? No turnout, no elevation, those pudgy legs. She dances so much better dead."

To the easy music of the waves
I dance with David in the dark.
Bonfire sparks glint in his eyes.
He swoops me into the air. I fly,

Swim beside him in the lake.

Damselflies skim over us.

Words waft in

from miles away.

It is so pleasant being dead, so easy floating naked here with David in the ocean, waveless now, and warm.

Words drift in ...

"Couldn't you just sneak her up in the middle of the night? "She'd be so good, Mom. I know she would. She wouldn't make a sound." Drift out ... "Oh, baby, you know we can't do that." "But I miss her so much." "That's why we need to get you better. So you can be with her again." "Couldn't you just bring her underneath the window so I could wave?"

In fading light I wake
to a headache and a tray:
cold tea, melted orange icey,
yellow Jell-O.

A doctor voice wishes Shannon good night.

In the hall a cigarette-voiced man yells, "You guys with your million-dollar machines and thousand-dollar pills!"

Mrs. Klein, on her imagined phone, orders a salmon steak, enough for two, make sure it's fresh this time.

I hear Shannon crying.

And with the dark
the night beetles gather.
I hear their oil-slick shells rattle,
feel the prickle of their legs,
the tickle of their feelers.

"DON'T TELL ME
VISITING HOURS ARE OVER
AND DON'T TELL ME TO CALM DOWN!"
yells the hall man.

"I'LL CALM DOWN
WHEN SOMEBODY STOPS SPOUTING
MEDICAL MUMBO JUMBO AND STARTS
MAKING HER BETTER!"

Their vinegar stink stings
my nostrils,
their whisper weight masses,
making ready, marching
to my heart's drumming.

"I'LL CALM DOWN WHEN YOU STOP

TALKING ABOUT
CUTTING HER OPEN.

"I'LL CALM DOWN WHEN YOU
JUST TELL ME. WHEN. ARE.
YOU. GONNA. MAKE. HER
BETTER?"

When I was little,
waiting for the night to end,
my dad could always
scare away the night beetles.

I have no legs, no voice, can only clench myself closed, try to fly my mind somewhere safe as the night beetles swarm.

And	Ιw	hisper	to	the	dark:
• •					0.0

"I wish I could be just me.

Without my body."

Then through the curtain, so soft
I hardly know
it's her:

if you imagine purring.

One of those big old stripey—
I'll just stand here on your pillow and keep this going all night long as you don't do something to annoy me—
tomcats with a rumbling purr that quiets down your breath and helps your heart un-hurt.

"Anyway. That's what works for me sometimes."

"I had a cat when I was little.

Bobo. My dad used to tuck her in with me at night.

"That Cupcake thing?

That's what he called me back then.

And I'm not saying

it was my goal in life:

'So, Chess, what do you want to be when you grow up?'

'Oh, I want to be a fattening pastry item.'

"And I realize the cupcake bottom line is, you get eaten, but I felt so ...

"I mean ... who doesn't love a cupcake?
Small and perfect.

Neat. Sweet ...

"If it were up to me I wouldn't even have bowels, "Never mind a disease with 'bowel' its middle name. "'Oh, hello! I'm Chess! I have a bowel disease! I'm gonna be spending my life looking for a bathroom!' "Not happening. I do not have it. I refuse. "At least cancer, even the meanest person wouldn't be all 'Ewwwwww!' behind your back, or, when they see you, trying not to look away.

"I mean, sick
is the last thing
you're supposed
to be thinking about
on an island in the middle
of a lake in the middle
of the night with a boy
like no boy you've met before.

"He was the first boy
I liked who ever really ...
you know ...
wanted me.

"Shannon?

Y'awake over there?"

```
"Yeah. But this pity-party shit
      is getting on my nerves.
      "They can't take shit,
      who needs 'em."
"Could you stop saying
that word, please?"
      "Oh, does Cupcake like
      the D-word better?
      Cuz you know, diarrhea
      can be your friend."
"I said, stop!"
      "Excuse me, Mr. Teacherperson.
      This exam takes how long?
      Because I think you should know
      I have this little diarrhea problem-"
"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR
THIS!"
```

```
"Oh, Aunt Mabel,
      I'd love to clean your garage.
      But unless you got a bathroom close by,
      and I mean REALLY close ..."
"SHANNON!"
      "And you don't even have to say
      the D-word, but trust me, if you do,
      no one will mess with you.
      They don't need to know
      your pills got it under control."
"Pills?
There are pills?
Besides the evil juice?"
      "Oh yeah.
      They got all kinds of pills.
      Pills, shots, shit they drip into you ..."
"That work?
Because
I mean, if
```

```
they work,
how come
you're so sick?
"Sorry!
I shouldn't
have said that!
I'm so sorry!"
      "And it's not like psoriasis
      or something where the whole world
      can see what you have.
      You might feel like crap, but
      to people who don't know
      you have a disease,
      you look fine.
      "Except for if you get the acne
      and the fat face
      from the evil juice,
      or your hair gets thin and weird.
      Like mine.
      "But you know what?
```

```
Most people are too busy
      worrying how they look
      to be thinking about you.
      "Unless the evil juice
      makes you blow up
      like a balloon.
      "Which obviously never
      happened to me. In fact,
      I could stand to gain—"
"If I get fat again
I'll die!"
      "Would you shut up about dying?
      I've been in and outta here
      since I was ten, okay?
      And do I look dead to you?
      Don't answer that!
      "Forget dying.
      Forget fat.
      Forget necessary evil.
```

```
There's only one necessary thing
and that's to get it through your head:
"We don't take stress.
We give stress.
"Which is why
you need to lose this 'sorry' shit.
Someone comes to take your blood,
and you're like: 'Oh, thank you!
How much would you like?
Oh, have some more!'
"Uh-uh! 'Go away! I barely
got enough to keep me going here!'
Why d'you need to be all meek
and shit?
"You're the one sick!
And you're worrying
some boy
won't like
you for it?
```

"Does that sound right to you?

"Yo. Are you even listening?
You didn't go to sleep on me, did you?"

"I can't be sick.

I've got this really busy life:

this summer job, plus

going to look at colleges.

Plus, I'm planning

to go out for track, so

I've been doing a lot of running.

"When I wasn't feeling too bad.

"Cuz I haven't been feeling all that good these last months.

"Plus, we had this whole plan—
those friends who were here before,
and me—to be, like, bolder, social-wise,

more out there. Not that we'd ever be as cool as this girl Julia and her ..."

"Shannon, you still awake?
I thought you'd make a crack
or something."

"Nah. Just thinking."

"So I'm walking to school scuffing my hand along one of those dusty hedges, feeling pretty good, with my little uniform skirt rolled up all short, and the lip gloss my mom thought she hid making my lips all juicy, and here's this dandelion sticking its nose out of the top of a bush, four feet in the air. "And it's not even a daisy, but I nip its head off cuz I just know God put it there so I can find out if Anthony Morabito in my homeroom loves me or loves me not. "And it's got like a jillion teensy petals, but this is important, right? So I pinch them, one by one, till there's nothing but a pile of yellow.

"And yeah, he loved me,
for about ten minutes,
and what made me think of this now
I don't know.
But I keep on thinking
"If that dandelion made it through
those sticks and branches,
taller than any dandelion is supposed
to grow, taller than Anthony,
most likely,
tall as it needed to be
to reach the light,
it had to have made another flower.
That can't have been the only one, right?"

```
"If we could order any ice cream flavor in the world? Right now?
What kind would you get?"
```

"That's easy. A root beer float.

Three scoops of vanilla, maybe four,
mountain of real whipped cream,
not the squirty shit—"

"I'd get that way-too-green pistachio with the cherries, the kind they only have—"

"Yeah, yeah.
In old-timey Chinese restaurants.
I used to love—"

"Me too.

"I could call my mom to bring us some.

"If morning ever—" From the hall, I hear: "I KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS! I'M FAMILY. I CAN VISIT ANY DAMN TIME I WANT! YOU KNOW WHERE I DROVE FROM? HOW FAR I CAME TO SEE MY LITTLE GIRL BEFORE YOU PEOPLE ..." "Oh, no! It's that man again!" "Sir. I'm going to have to-"

"I LOVE YOU, HONEY! "EXCUSE ME.

DO NOT

TOUCH ME.

TAKE YOUR HANDS

OFF ME. I'M

HER FATHER.

"YOU CAN'T

TELL ME TO LEAVE."

"Yes, sir. I can.

You can come back

in the morning."

"NO.

YOU

CAN'T!"

"Shannon?"

"Is that

your dad?"

Picturing a dad wiry, scraggly like her.

Bulky tall, like mine.

Picturing flinching, bracing, flinging, sinking into the arms of someone you're never sure you want to see.

"NO. JUST
SOME DRUNK
ASSHOLE
NO ONE
WANTS HERE."

"You don't have to tell me about not wanting anyone to see you like this.

"Or about dads ...

"I mean, it was a long time ago,

"So long I hardly think about him

Except, you know, times like this."

"One ear was bigger than the other and stuck out and, when he rode me on his shoulders, made the perfect turn signal and an even better handle when I hooked

"My other arm around to honk his nose.

He'd bugle like a bike horn,

Ooga-ooga like a clown.

Then, all outraged
innocence, go, 'What's funny?'

"Or, 'What, do I look like a horse to you?'
when I yanked his ear
and hollered 'Giddyap!'
'Yes!' I'd go, and
he'd bray and sputter.

"I actually scrutinized my left ear every time I passed a mirror, eager for the Ear of Distinction, as he called it, doing his Mount Rushmore face, then wiggling both his ears until I smiled.

"I'm over it. Obviously. Who wants an ear that sticks out through your hair?

Plus, this has to be your basic corny dad story.

No doubt every daddy in the universe does the old honking horsey ride.

"No doubt he's cracking up the new kid now.
Unless the new wife made him pin the ear back.
Or the new kid bit it off."

```
"I'll shut up now.

I know I'm blabbing.
```

"And I know I'm supposed to stop being sorry, but I'm so sorry I said that to the shrink about your body hating you, being out to get you.

"About you having something ... you know ... chronic."

"Yeah, well ...

"The good news is chronic ain't fatal.

"Except when you die from it."

"Yeah, but what kind of life do you have? If you even have a life. "And what exactly does 'inflammation' mean?"

Picturing flames licking through her guts, barbeque briquettes smoldering holes in her insides.

"Shannon. That island I was talking about before? That night?"

And my insides
burn, my blood
throbs and bubbles,
and I can't tell if
it's a surge of evil juice,
or a temp of 108,
or where my mind
keeps taking me.

"Shannon? Something really bad happened.

"With that boy.

"I was thinking
about telling—
I mean, they've been
my best friends
since preschool—

"But it was Lexie's brand-new dress
I was wearing that night.

"And not just that.

It was like ... it felt like

we're from different planets.

Like they're in Cupcake World.

And I'm on, I don't know, Uranus."

And I want her to laugh, make a sixth-grade joke, say, Well I hope you're not planning on telling *me*, because I've got all the shit I can handle.

Say something. "And now it's like someone's peeling my skin off with a potato peeler. Like I'm feeling the feelings of every sick person in this hospital, and I can't make it go away. "It seems easier to just die." "Don't say that! Don't ever say that!" "I wish I could stay a cupcake. "I wish your cat was here." "What cat?"

"The cat you were talking about purring on your chest all night."

```
"I don't have a cat."
"But I heard you asking
your mom to smuggle—"
      "HEY! DID I ASK YOU TO EAVESDROP
     ON MY PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS?"
"No, but I mean, here we are—"
      "RIGHT! TWO SORRY-ASS SICK GIRLS
     STARING AT THE CEILING!
     THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU
     CAN ... I'VE GOT NO TIME
      FOR THIS!
     I'VE GOT THINGS TO DO!"
"Stop yelling!
I'm trying to tell you something.
"Those things
```

I said?

```
"About you
being sick?
"It was cuz I'm lying here
trying to get my mind around ...
"Shannon.
What if
"it's not
just your
body that's ...?
"And please
don't be like
Duhhh!
because—"
      "Yeah. That was my dad, okay?
      "And I have a daughter.
      Not a cat.
```

"A baby girl."

```
You?
Baby?
With Anthony Morabito?
So that was, like, a parable?
Are you still with him?
Or with someone else?
Where is she?
Aren't you too sick
to take care of her?
What's gonna ...
But I would no more ask her
than ...
      "Her name is Joya.
      She's with my other grandmother
      in Atlantic City.
      Might as well be Uranus.
      "And if you ask me one question
      or say 'sorry,' I'm gonna have to
```

come over there and kick your sorry

sick-girl ass."

```
"Chess. Y'asleep?"
"No. Just lying here.
Thinking about that night."
I almost
tell her then.
How it started out so beautiful,
so magically, amazingly beautiful ...
"This disease ought to come with amnesia.
You know that?
"Shannon? You sleeping?"
      "If I was sleeping would I be asking
      if you're sleeping?
      "You feeling any better?"
```

"No.

That stuff the shrink gave me?

That's supposed to be making me sedate
and tranquil?

It's not working.

I'm gonna call the nurse
to give me more."

```
"She's so quiet tonight,
Mrs. Klein."
```

"Open'd be good."

```
"Yeah. Where's old Sam
when we need him?"

"Chess?
I was thinking about opening
the curtain.

"Is that
okay with you?"
```

"We could use some air."

"Listen. If I die
will you send me flowers?
And don't tell me I'm not dying.
I know that. But
if I do?"

"I'll totally send you flowers."

"Then I'll send you some, too.

But I don't want ugly cheap-ass ones.

Carnations and shit.

Or gladiolas.

I hate gladiolas.

"There was an old lady at my church named Gladiola. She was ugly, too."

"Don't worry.

I even hate the word 'gladiola.' ${\it "}$

"Get me red roses.

So many my eyes will bug out even though I'm dead. So many

I can smell them through my coffin.

"What should I get you?"

"Red roses will do."

"Or we could send each other something now.
Without dying.

Because, I mean,
if we both die,
we're basically fucked."

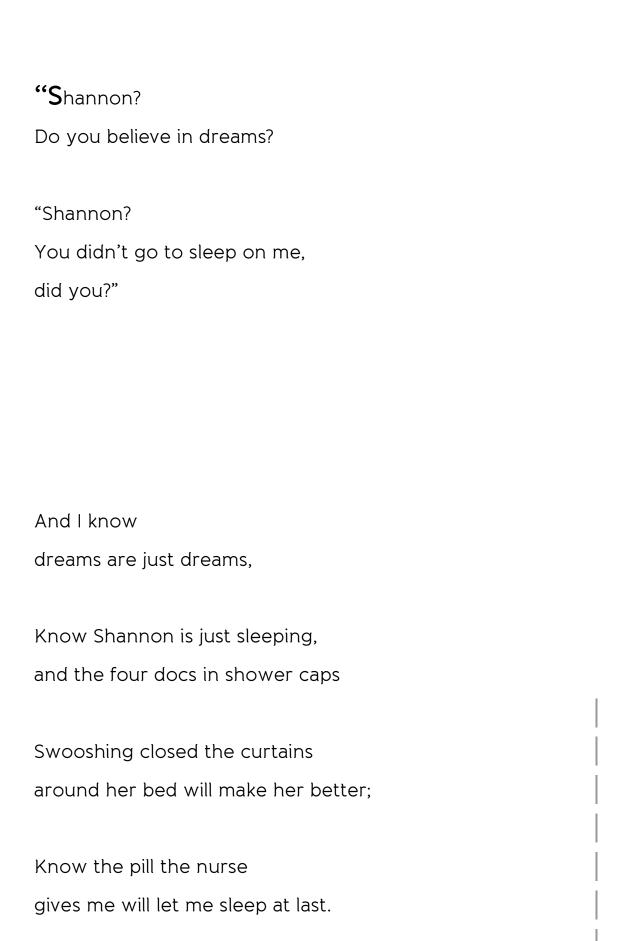
In a shoe just big enough for her body, a girl bobs on the ocean.

A tiny girl bob-bobbing in a wooden shoe

Too high
to see over,
too tight to turn

Her head can't lift her arms to row. No wind to blow

The shoe to shore, no one to hear her scream.



The bells, beeps, buzzes, urgent

voices I hear can only be a dream.
Surely I imagine the rubber squeak
of a bed pushed out the door, and later
In this endless night imagine
Mrs. Klein's bed, too,
Wheeled out past mine:
Hallucinate her
sepulchral croak:
"Dead as a mackerel
on a tray."

In the hall carts clank.

Nurse voices discuss the weather.

Night beetles shriek and chitter.

I want to cry out for my mom, my dad, another pill to kill the dreaming, let me burrow deep and deeper.

But I can't stop thinking

You can simply stop being

In the dark with nobody to see.

FOURTH DAY

" \mathbf{H} ey there, Champ!"

"Shh! Steve! Let her sleep.

We haven't seen that sweet smile since she stayed with us the summer things went bad, and she'd wake up crying for her daddy, and you'd sing 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' and she'd climb into your lap and you'd promise her we'd never let anything else ..."

"No, it was that other song by what's-his-name ..."

"Right, right.

The one who's bald now."

"We're all bald now.

It's Poppy, Cupcake.

Poppy and Nana."

"To get you all cleaned up and pretty."

It is so pleasant being dead, so easy, lulled by the rain streaming the windows, pummeling the roof,

In neutral, slowly rolling in rhythm with the flapping, flopping, foaming, slapping.
Smoothing, stroking, stroking, soothing,

"New nail polish ... sushi pajamas ... so adorable ... tuna, eel and cucumber, California roll, wasabi green ...

"Don't you feel better all clean and spiffy with your pretty pink toes?

"That nice doctor says
You're doing better
and better.

"See all the cards you got And those gorgeous pink roses?"

"Shannon sent me roses?"

"Barb, did she just say something?"

"I don't think so.

So nice to finally have a little peace and quiet in here. So nice to have the room to ourselves!"

"Excuse me, Nurse,
we'd like to get her out of this gown
and into these new pajamas.
Would you give us a hand?"

It is so easy being me, three, clean and coddled, cuddled hearing, not hearing, hearing, not caring,

Here outside of time inside the car-wash storm.

```
"Should we say something to her, Steve?
About ... you know ..."
"The birthday party?
It's your birthday, Cupcake.
Did you remember today's—"
"No, Steve. The ... other thing.
Both other things."
"Barb, no need to upset her
till she's feeling better."
Icicles of light
prickle,
swirl,
shatter.
Monitor Me tastes
my stagnant mouth,
hears my voice,
creaky as Mrs. Klein's:
"What other things?"
```

"Well, good morning, Sleeping Beauty!"

Sees me fumble
through rumpled bedding
for the button
to raise my aching head.

"WHAT TIME IS IT? WHAT HAPPENED?"

There has to be some clicker, button, windshield wiper to unfog this ...

"Sweetie, I'm afraid there were some ... developments in the—"

"Barb!

It's okay, Chessie.

This is no time to think about anything but getting better.

Everything. Is. Fine."

"Look. They left your breakfast tray. Would you like a little ..." "Developments? With SHANNON?" Yo! No dying here! Nobody dies in my room. Including me! "WHERE IS SHE? WHERE'S SHANNON?" "You didn't even like her, sweetie." "Barbara!" "It's true. The nurse told us you practically demanded a different room." "Chessie! What are you doing? Please!

You're in no shape to ...

CAREFUL OF THOSE TUBES!"

I fight to keep the walls

from wobbling,

floor from cracking

into a kaleidoscope,

Ignore the roaring

in my ears, my head

giraffe-far

from my feet,

legs limp

as rubber bands.

"Chessie, watch out

for the pole!"

"Steve, help her

with that curtain!"

In the bed by the window,

a stranger snores.

And where Shannon's bed was, air.

No fallen card or crumpled straw

To show that either one was there.

"Noooooo! "SHE SAID NO DYING HERE!" Foot catches. Water splashes. Vase shatters. Roses scatter. I stumble to the floor. "Nurse! Steve! Get the nurse!" "She tripped, that's all. She's fine.

"NO! SHE PROMISED ME

Chess. You're okay, right?"

NO DYING!"

```
"Shhh."
Soft nurse hands
lift me into bed,
pull the curtains.
"Shhh.
She was very, very sick
for a very long time.
And last night, I'm sorry to say,
she expired."
"Expired?
You mean
SHE'S DEAD?"
"Yes. Poor Mrs. Klein.
She's in a better place."
"NO! MY FRIEND SHANNON,
WHO I PROMISED
ROSES."
```

"I know, cookie. I know. That was a tough night, last night. First Mrs. K., then that little girl rushed off to surgery. But don't worry. You're doing fine. You're gonna be—" "She's not dead?" "That scrappy little girl? Uh-uh. Her surgery took longer than—" "She didn't say anything about ... HOW COULD SHE NOT TELL ME?" "Shhh. It was an emergency, She didn't know. But don't worry. She'll be back. That little girl's a fighter.

Just like you."

cry for Mrs. Klein.

I sleep.

Eat half
a scrambled egg,

Let doctors measure, push, and poke,

Listen to them praise my progress, urge me to sit up, try a walk.

I open my curtain,
walk to the visitor chair
beside the space
where Shannon's
bed should be, sit,

And wait.

Listen to the new lady
in Mrs. Klein's bed

grumble on the phone behind her curtain and scold the nurse.

Wait.

Try not to watch the clock.

Or let my mind jump to David before I read the florist card that came with the pink roses:

Eleanor and Jared Kaye.

Read the sushi names on my ridiculous pajamas.

Push zucchini, rice, and some nameless fish fillet around my plate.

Try not to think

of Lake George summers

whacking heads off trout,

slicing their bellies open,

pulling out shiny blue-pink guts,

scraping clean their flesh.

Try not to picture

Shannon's scalpeled belly,

Shannon's guts tossed

in a bucket.

Think about a haircut,
pepperoni pizza,
if Mom's picked up my paycheck,
new size 2 skinny jeans,
possibly tangerine,

Till muscles twitch, nerves itch, and if there's no proof soon
Shannon is okay,
I'm going to explode.

Teetery baby step

Doddering old lady step

Past the bathroom through the door

Hopscotch square by square

Into the fluorescent hall hubbub

In my rhinestone flip-flops and embarrassing pajamas.

Step step past gurneys, carts, computers,

Past an old man parked in a wheelchair who calls, "You go, girl!"

Step. One hand on the pole the other on the wall

Legs noodling but still moving

Step. Okay.

I can see

The nurses' station.

The Orange Croc Doc on her phone.

"You okay, my love?" asks a nurse.

I catch my breath and say I'm fine.

I really do mean
to ask the Orange Croc Doc
about Shannon. But:

"Doctor? Is my ... you know ... what you said I might ..."

"Your Crohn's disease?"

My eyes won't look at her.

Head can't get itself to nod.

"That's what I have? For sure? Crohn's?"

And I don't know if my knees tremble from the evil-sounding word, the walk, or evil juice,

If the hot hollow in my belly is hunger or inflammation eating my insides,

If this spinny weakness means

I'm sicker, or just starting to feel the sickness that's been inside me all along.

"Guess I'm just lucky
I don't need an operation, right?
Like Shannon?"

Down the hall, a man with a limp stops pacing, hurries toward us.

"I don't. Right, Doc?"

"Not now, no. And hopefully, we can continue to manage your disease medically."

"Hopefully?

Does that mean you don't know?"

"Doc!"

Cigarette voice, spattered work boots,

Shannon's dragon eyes:

"They took her in at six!

It's half past one!

What's goin' on?"

"Just a minute, Mr. Williams.

Chess, Crohn's is an

unpredictable disease.

I can't promise you won't—"

"Yeah, and even if she did, we know what her promises are worth!"

His cane jabs the air.

"You people promised
no more surgery.

Said there'd be nothing left
if you kept cutting,
and now ...

I told her mom
she should have taken her
down to New York.

Or Boston.

Anywhere

but here!"

The Orange Croc Doc touches my arm.

"We'll talk more later, Chess.

Walk with me, Mr. Williams."

Beetles rattle in my ears, cloud my eyes as she leads him toward the elevator,

And I want to follow, find out what they're saying,

Or scream: No!

Come back!

Talk to me now!

But Monitor Me hears my voice hollow-bright as Nana's:

"She'll be okay.

Don't worry, Mr. Willliams.

Shannon will be fine."

```
"Happy birthday, darling!"
```

"I told you we'd bring the party to you!"

"Here's our beautiful girl!"

"Hey. Chess."

Mom, Nana, Poppy, Charlie, Dawn, and Cousin Kimmy hug me, kiss me.

"Have some sparkling cider.

A cupcake.

Your doctor said it's fine.

They're so good.

I bought a ton

in case friends come."

"Mother." Dawn and Mom exchange raised-eyebrow glances.

"Where on earth

did you find those pajamas?"

Poppy launches into "Happy Birthday."

"Excuse me!"

The lady in Mrs. Klein's bed clears her throat.

"I happen to be a very sick woman."

"We're sorry, sweetie, it's just—"

"My name,
for your information,
is not Sweetie.
I taught Language Arts
in the Albany schools
for forty-one years.
My name is Mrs. Murch."

Kimmy chokes back giggles,

Nana offers

Mrs. Murch a cupcake,

Poppy pulls in chairs, pulls out jokes,

While Mom wonders if she dares have a cupcake, since it is my birthday,

And Aunt Dawn wonders if we wouldn't be more comfortable in the lounge,

And Mrs. Murch mutters she'd be more comfortable, that's for sure,

And I try to find smiles, thanks, not now thanks,

When all I want is to jump free of this body and disappear.

And finally,

Green Jacket Man ferrying the bed,

A nurse unhooking, hooking, docking,

Her mom and grandma, hovering,

And Shannon, tiny, tubed,

Lifting a limp hand to wave, and in a voice scratchy

From the tube down her nose,
mumbling to Mrs. Murch,
"Has anyone ever told you
you look like a bullfrog?"

Before her eyes drift away,

Her curtain

closed.

"Grrrmph!"
goes Mrs. Murch,
so froggily
I have to turn my hoot
into a cough

As moms and grandmas, trying for smoothing smiles, hurry to explain it must be the anesthesia, the morphine, the steroids making people say things they'd never say and certainly don't mean,

That Mrs. Murch bears no resemblance whatsoever to a frog of any sort!

"I happen to be a very sick woman," garrumphs Mrs. Murch, and I laugh, laugh, can't stop laughing. "She's never like this," Mom assures them, and I laugh until I'm crying, crying, crumpled, crying. "This isn't her. She'll be herself again soon as she's had some sleep. Don't worry. She'll be fine." "Right! Like Shannon's fine! Like Mrs. Klein is fine!" Rage hotter than lava, eviler than evil juice

roars in my ears,

floods my belly, blurs my eyes. "Because I'm the Queen of Fine. Or is that you, Mom? You tell me I'm fine. I tell you I'm fine. That's the deal, right? Ever since Dad. Keep it quiet. Keep it nice. Everyone is fine." Monitor Me feels me sliding, skidding, fishtailing on black ice

As they pat me, hug me,
"it's okay" me, assure me
I'm so much better,
things always feel worse

before they get better. Monitor Me tries to pull me back, talk me down, remind me they're just scared. I tell Monitor Me to fuck off, tell Bri's obnoxious blue balloon with its cheery GET WELL to fuck off, too. And fuck this tremble in my voice: "There is no better here. This is me. With a horrible disease that never goes away. "Can you protect me from that? Can anyone protect anyone

from anything?	
"Because	
I am sick	
to death	
of protecting	
you!"	
I rip the balloon string	
from my IV pole.	
Stomp it,	
stomp it	
till it pops.	
"What was that?"	
cries Mrs. Murch.	
"Me, telling everyone	
to GO AWAY!"	

Part of me wants to rewind time, hug ugly words away,

Grab their hands
as Shannon's mom throws mine
a look like: Welcome to the club!

Beg them, as they fumble for bags and pocketbooks, please don't leave me here alone.

But the rage flows, shocking and unstoppable as shit.

I turn my back on them.
Climb into bed.

"Come on, now.

I don't want to hear

that kind of talk."

The nurse taps a pill from a tiny pleated cup into my hand.

"You don't hate yourself.

After the day you had,
who wouldn't be a little stressed?
And you and I both know
you don't hate them.

"Have a little more water, cookie.

Take some good deep breaths.

I'm gonna lower your bed for you and you're gonna take your mind someplace calm and peaceful.

Someplace beautiful.

That's a good girl."

Her voice warmed

from a scold to a caress.

And there I am,
back on the island
in Lexie's gauzy, flowery,
brand-new dress,
which we're already calling
her good-luck dress because
it's so much cooler
than the stuff we wear,
and it's not nearly warm enough,
not even with my jean jacket,
but it's so beautiful.

Giant moon, bazillion stars, canoe floated off somewhere among the water lilies, marooned, like something in a movie or a song,

And he's kissing,
touching
like no boy
has touched me,
and even through the pain,

"no" melts into "maybe,"	
"maybe" begins to	
But then	
this churning	
roiling burning	
fainting feeling	
starts and	
I can't	
do anything	
to stop it.	
And first	
I'm just afraid	
I'll puke,	
but then	
There's the	
smell.	
And I try to jump	
into the lake	

before it's too late,

But

it's too late.

And I try to swim away
from the stink,
from the mess,
from poor David,
who, baffled,
or maybe horrified,
has jumped in after me,

And the water's so cold
I'm sure I'll die,
but it's numbing
the pain enough
so I can keep
swimming,

trying to kick
my underpants off
and swim at the same time,
praying the water

will wash off the mess before he catches me, terrified I've ruined Lexie's dress,

And it's starting to rain, and the whole swim back to shore, the whole wet, wordless walk with him along the road to the pine tree where he left his guitar,

The whole way
to his truck,
the whole shivering
ride home, me squashed
up against the open window
in case there's still the stench,
he's like: "Are you okay?
I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

And I can't tell

if he's too sweet, too grossed out, or too petrified to say anything but "Sorry."

Or if there's any, any, any way he doesn't know.

Not that it matters.

I can never
see him again.

Tubes draining stuff out,
dripping stuff in:

Clothespin thingy
on her finger,

Electrodes, wires,
glubs and beeps.

I watch her mom and grandma
play gin rummy

While nurses bustle
and Shannon sleeps.

 \mathbf{A} ll night through the curtain I hear whispered words of comfort, complications, prayer. Meanwhile, I eat cupcake after cupcake until somehow

I sleep.

Only to wake tangled in covers gunked with frosting, clammy with sweat, in a room still dark and, except for the gurgle of machines, silent as a tomb.

No. Shannon's breathing.

Don't think. Don't look

at crumpled cupcake papers.

Or my face in the mirror.

Brush my teeth. Wash.

Push the pole up the hall,

down the hall, up again.

Walk yesterday away.

"Something you need?"
The clock on the wall
behind the nurse
says four-thirty-three.

[&]quot;Food?"

Hunger surges as I say it.

And a calm giddiness
almost like a runner's high.

"Um. Do you think it's possible to get so mad it blasts the sickness out of you?"

Knowing full well if that was true Shannon would be out dancing. But then why this sudden ...

"Because I had a giant meltdown yesterday, and even though I ate like seven cupcakes last night, if you gave me a lobster right now, I'd eat it shell and all.

Plus just yesterday
I could barely walk this far, and now ..."

The nurse checks my chart on her computer.

"You've had four days

of pretty powerful meds.

Some of it might be the steroids revving you up, but it looks to me like you're on the mend."

FIFTH DAY

Before the sun, before the carts,

Before the blood man comes for blood,

Brisk and chipper, the shower-cap docs

Crowd round her bed, nodding as the briskest

Reads out the latest from her chart,

Frowning when he asks if she's passed gas,

Striding off again when she doesn't answer.

Med students' eyes are softer than the docs'.

They file in behind their Duck in Chief, trying to look earnest when he asks about the gas,

Their eyes so soft yet so determined to miss nothing and fix everything,

These shiny-haired, blue-scrubbed girls and one cute rumpled guy who even walks like a duck and looks like he would kill for coffee.

I can't help wondering how I'd look in scrubs like theirs, stethoscope around my neck, asking how people feel today,

So relieved and proud when they say "Better."

Which, amazingly, I do. Because, it seems, I am.

My numbers are looking great, they say. They're cutting back the evil juice. Switching me to pills instead of the IV.

Which makes my heart so glad so guilty, so scared when I peek through at silent Shannon,

Tubes gurgling stuff out, dripping stuff in, legs in puffing life-preserver thingies,

Pain button in her hand,

I think of calling Mom. Eat another cupcake.

"So is it true I'm getting better?" I ask the Orange Croc Doc. "What does better mean for somebody like me?" Inside my drawer Mom's cell buzzes. buzzes. "It means," the Orange Croc Doc says, when I don't pick it up, "you're on your way

"Then what?
Cuz what if I start, like, hoping,

The voice mail dings.

and then—"

to being out of here."

"I think you know, Chess,

Crohn's is a tough and unpredictable disease."

"Yes. Everyone keeps saying that."

"Crohn's can flare up and it can calm down again. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. For now,

the plan is to taper
you off the steroids,
to get you in remission,
and back to your life."

"What if unpredictable doesn't work for me? What if I need to know what my life is gonna be? How do I know I won't ... what if I ..."

The text chime rings.

"That's gonna be my mom.

Telling me I upset Nana.

Or Nana telling me I really upset Mom.

It was my birthday yesterday.

I kind of ruined it for everyone."

"Then let's start by making today better,"
she says. "I know you'll be glad
to lose the IV.

How about a shower?

Wash yesterday away.

Put some curl

back in your hair."

Unhooked,

I'm light enough

to float up

to the ceiling,

flutter

to the bathroom floor.

The nurse swaddles

the IV needle

still sticking in my vein

with plastic wrap

and rubber bands,

hands me two big towels.

[&]quot;Enjoy," she says.

Anyone who thinks heaven is not hot water behind a locked door has forgotten what it means to live.

Okay.

Like getting up your nerve

To step onto the scale, I edge

Zitful, puff-bellied, pin-eyed, moon-faced, brown-toothed, crawled-from-the-crypt seaweed-hair steroid girl?

Or interestingly older,
poet-pale, heart-achingly brave,
winningly fragile, newly wise?
With dragon eyes?

Toward

the mirror.

Hmm.

Face fatter
than I'd like.
Except for the bruisey
circles under my eyes,
cadaver pale.

But clean.

Not fat.

In fact,

really thin.

In fact, somebody
who liked me/
loved me/
really knew me
might,
if they weren't
grossed out or terrified
I might die,
might in the right light,
candles, or maybe
moonlight ...

Hey, David.

Does ethereal antelope

work for you?

"Text me,"

he said.

Or did he say

anything

as I stumbled

from his car

thanking God

for the dark

so he couldn't see

me cry?

No.

Let it go.

Start by making today better.

I press the call button

beside the toilet.

A nurse voice booms:

"Need some help in there?"

"No. I just wanted to ask.

Does this place

let people

wear clothes?"

In the last pajamas I hope/swear/hope
I will ever wear, here or possibly in life,

I scrunch, twist, twirl my wet hair to help it curl, step

From the steamy bathroom into my room's early-morning sun.

So my heart should soar when Mom, dressed for work, appears with my gray sweats, a choice of tees, my underwear, my bra.

Gingerly, as if she's from the bomb disposal squad, she steps toward me, lifts a careful eyebrow at my pajamas.

"I thought you might want something a little less ... not that it wasn't really sweet of Nana, but ..."

I give her
a matching eye roll,
lift my eyebrow in return.

"You've saved me from her sushi."

When we need something safe to bond around, a Nana joke is tried and true.

"And look at you!

No tubes.

All clean and shiny.

Practically your old self again.

I thought about bringing jeans,

but then I thought, no, better ..."

And I'm about to thank her for her perfect timing, step into her arms, tell her I didn't mean to ruin the party,

When she tells me Bri
called last night to say
she and Lexie took a drive
to Sugar Snap Farm
to pick up some raspberries
for my birthday.

And the lava starts boiling up again.

"What? Mom, I specifically told you ..."

Ears buzz

like electrocuted beetles.

"I'm finally
starting to feel a little better,
finally got myself to stop
thinking about things,
and now here you are
telling me my friends
did exactly
what I told you
and told them
not
to do?"

And I can't let myself yell or I'll wake poor Shannon,

And I hate the hurt in Mom's eyes as she says,

"I did tell them.

I told them the other day you're not supposed to eat anything with seeds."

But still the words howl out of me:

"AND NOW YOU'RE TELLING ME
I CAN'T EVEN EAT RASPBERRIES?"

"Chessie.

I talked to the doctor.

She said they're going to lower your steroid dose again tomorrow.

That should help with the mood swings and there are plenty of things you *can* eat. She said—"

"DO I LOOK LIKE
I WANT TO HEAR
ABOUT MOOD SWINGS?
I HAVE NO CONTROL

OVER ANYTHING
IN MY LIFE.
NOT MY BODY.
NOT MY FRIENDS.
NOT EVEN YOU."

"We don't take stress, we give stress, isn't that what you said?"

I tell Shannon through the curtain

"You said it was time to lose that sorry shit. So I did."

Tell her even though she's sleeping.

when Mom's gone.

"It's okay to be pissed, right? Pissed is good.

"Like being pissed at you if I thought you knew

"You were having that surgery And didn't tell me."

Then I leave a really pissed message on Bri's phone.

All day I prowl the halls, passing every pole-pushing hospital-gowned patient

Trudging up and down like me, nodding to every thumbs-up smile I pass,

Trying not to look for Bri or Lexie around every corner.

Or think or wonder.

Walk, doze, nose around the nurses' station.

Try to ignore Mrs. Murch's incessant complaining, Mom's cell's insistent buzzing from my drawer.

Peer at Shannon through the curtain as doctors confer, hover.

Listen to her mom and grandma ask about fevers after surgery,

Tell her we're just waiting for her new meds to kick in.

Watch them sponge her face, murmur, pray.

Tweeze my eyebrows.

Turn my TV on to drown out her whimpers.

Turn it off again. Shut down Mom's cell.

Turn off the ringer on the bedside phone.

Talk to an aide

named Ernie.

Take another walk, another nap, fetch nurses when her IV's beeping or the groans get louder.

"So, Shannon, did you know everyone here has name tags? The blood man's Astro.
Orange Croc Doc is Dr. E. Hochstein.

"And did we know the shrink guy is Dr. B. Blank? Dr. Duck's name is C. Nguyen.

"The floor clerk, Ms. P. Johnson, who's worked here thirty-seven years, showed me a nest with three baby pigeons peeping so loud you could hear them through the kitchen window.

"Did you even know there was a kitchen room? Where you can help yourself to powdered soup and tea? "And a lounge down the hall with magazines?

They were all like Golf Digest and G a s t r o e n t e r o l o g y Today,

"But I can look for something better for you if you want, when I go out again."

Study myself in the mirror eavesdrop, pester anyone

who'll talk to me about complications after surgery,

read Golf Digest,
read Gastroenterology Today.

"So, Shannon, I thought you might want to know.

The Orange Croc Doc's 'E' is for Elina.

"And those pigeons?

I didn't actually hear them peeping.

I was just, you know, trying
to entertain you.

"Okay. Now here's something entertaining.

My dinner tray.

Want to know what's on it?

"Something that may
have been a veggie
in its former life.
Cream soup the same green
as the curtain.
Rice with flecks of some sort.
Rigor mortis chicken.

"Believe me, Shannon,

you are missing nothing."	
Guiltily gobble	
every scrap.	

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"I know, Shannie.
I know it hurts.
"But the thing about pain?
It fades.
"If women could remember
pain, there'd be no babies.
"You'll say what we all say:
It hurt so much
"You could hardly stand
how much.
"It hurt so bad
you thought you'd die.
"But it'll just be words.
Those words will be just ghosts,
And the stories you tell nothing
but stories.
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"And you'll jump out of that bed like you always do,

"Hold your baby like I'm holding you now,

"And get on with your life, the same pain in my butt

"You always were and always will be.

"I promise you.

These days will fade away."

"And I promise you, too, Chess."

Shannon's grandma's shoes squeak as she walks around to my side, the light just bright enough for me to read

East Greenbush Wrestling in peeling letters on her hoodie.

"Now let me just tuck you in and say sleep tight.

Good night to you too, Mrs. Murch," she calls through the curtain.

"I can tell you're a nurse by the way you wake me up to say good night." I think about calling Mom to say good night, another sorry.

Find Bri's text waiting on Mom's cell in the drawer.

Why r u so mad???
We barely talked to D
just told him ur up in Albany
in the hospital really sick.
That's all we said besides
how r the razberries today
He looked a little weird/not glad
to see us. Then he rushed off so we
couldn't ask anything even if
we wanted. R u ever
gonna tell us wassup?

Someone in the hall guffaws.

Farts like a fourth-grade

farting contest echo

through the wall.

Not even a whimper

breaks Shannon's silence.

How can I be so mad when my little drama, my little life feels a zillion miles away?

"Why is she so quiet?" I ask the nurse who hangs another IV bag for Shannon.

"She had a tough day."

"But it's a good sign, right?
That she's stopped moaning?"

He puts a finger to his lips.

"It's past midnight, lovey.

Go to sleep."

"I thought the thing
about being young is that—
except for, like, can I run
a half marathon,
am I as cute as so-and-so,
is my butt too big for these jeans—
you don't have to think
about your body.

"You're not supposed to have to worry if it's gonna make it through the day.

"That's one of the things making me so mad. Not just for me. For you.

"Sometimes it feels like mad's the only thing we've got to get us through.

"Shannon?

You're still mad, right?"
I listen for her breath.
Hear nothing
but the puff of her machines,
Mrs. Murch's gargley snores.
"Shannon?
Now you're scaring me."

"That she's not answering doesn't mean she's not hearing, right?"
I ask the nurse when he tiptoes in again to check our vitals.

"Why are you still up?" he asks.

"It's four a.m."

I count my breaths,

her breaths,

Mrs. Murch's snores.

The night beetles swarm.

When I pull back the curtain, I see

covers tight as her grandma tucked her.

Melting ice chips

in her cup.

Face turned

to the wall.

To the hum of her machines
I sing us choir songs,
list favorite movies of all time,
Baskin-Robbins flavors,
brands of cereal,

Boys I liked, loved,
wished I dated, hated;
books, games, dog names
if we had a dog;
Crayola colors.

And I know

if I keep talking

I can keep her going:

"Inch worm,

Bittersweet,

Tumbleweed,

Fern.

Cerulean,

Cerise,

Sepia,

Mango Tango.

"Atomic Tangerine,

Wild Watermelon,

Dandelion,

Neon Carrot,

Timberwolf,

Mauvelous ..."

"Shannon?

"You're not like in a coma or something, are you?

"Cuz my theory is you're not talking cuz you're like, 'What'd I do to deserve this shit? I'm sick of it.

Wake me when it's over.'

"That's how I feel, too.

"Shannon, if I tell you what happened to me on the island will you promise not to tell?

"Shannon?

Did you hear

what I just told you?

"Blink once
for Yes

"Twice
for Fuck You.

"Shannon.

Talk to me."

SIXTH DAY

Early as yesterday, brisk and chipper, the surgeons whip closed her curtain.

"How we doing today, Ms. Williams?

Mind if we take a look at the incision?

"Good. I see your fever's down."

"Excuse me. I'm a little worried about her," I call out, same as I've told the nurse each time he checks our vitals.

"We've got your infection under control. How's the pain,Ms. Williams?Passed any gas?"

"I'm worried about Shannon."

I catch the eye of Dr. Nguyen as the duck brigade arrives,

Listen to the head duck tell
Mrs. Murch, "Great news!
You're going home!"

Listen to her complain she's still a very sick woman,

Listen as they reel off Shannon's numbers,

Listen to the head duck asking if by any chance she's passed gas from below.

"It's not something to be shy about,
Ms. Williams.
Passing gas is a good thing.
Passing gas means your guts
are waking up, so we can start
you on some food, begin—"

"Doctor!

Forget the gas!

I'm worried she's not talking!" I wait to be shushed, soothed, scolded. Instead, I hear a croak rusty as Mrs. Klein: "You better hope you're not here when I pass gas, Doc. "If you are, get ready to run. "When I pass gas this whole fuckin' hospital's gonna go up in flames." Dr. Nguyen takes a quick detour past my bed. "I think your friend's gonna be okay." He's trying not to smile.

"She's back!"

I tell Astro, the blood man, Bobby, the vitals guy.

"Watch out, Shannon's back!"

I warn Dr. R. Schmidt, the doc she advised to be a coroner, Joyce, the nurse who calls us cookie.

A croak, a cough, a rough clearing of her throat:

"Yo. Cookie! That you?

What day of the week is it?

And if you tell me the first day

of the rest of my life, I might have to—"

"She's back, all right."

Joyce shakes her head,

smiles, handing me my pills.

"It's Tuesday, Shannon.

Good to hear your cheery voice again."

"What's good is having that damn

tube outta my nose.

You could get that pain pump thing outta here, too."

"You sure?

You're a brave little girl, Shannon.

You don't need to be a hero."

I follow Joyce around

to Shannon's side,

throat full

with words

that even in my ears

sound puny, lame.

Arms tight around her pillow,

pain button in her hand

Shannon is sleeping.

Crisp in her lab coat,
curls tamed with pins,
Dr. Hochstein—who in my mind
will always be the Orange Croc Doc—
pulls up a plastic chair
across from Mom and me.

"So, Chess? Ready to go home tomorrow?"

I'm grateful we're in the lounge so Shannon can't see my joy.

"Excellent. Because ..."

But if I'm so happy,

why do I hear myself add

"I guess?"

Why am I watching branches bang against the windows, people shaking out umbrellas,

When I should be listening

to her tell us how many books, blogs, sites, support groups are available for teens like me;

How many drugs
to put me in remission,
and with luck keep me there,
with new ones all the time:

While Mom, with the same careful smile on her face I feel on mine, takes notes, talks prescriptions, doctor appointments, food restrictions.

"Any questions, Chess?"

Besides: Will Shannon ever be okay?

Besides: How do I know when I look at Shannon I'm not seeing Future Me?

Besides: How do you not hate your friends for being well?

Your mom for not making it all just go away?

Besides: How do you know who you are when you can't trust your own body?

How do you act when you're so mad, so scared of what's inside?

"Chess." The Orange Croc Doc takes her glasses off, leans closer.

"You've been pretty sick Probably for a long time."

I watch a leaf shaped like a mitten stick to the window glass.

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"And this is a lot for you to swallow."
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Watch the parking-lot gate swing open for a car, drop down.

Remember the brain-frying tiredness, the pain endured to get through a day,

The terrifying pains that night ...

I look at Mom, look away.

"Sometimes

I thought

I might be

dying.

"But I didn't

say anything

because ..."

An ache worse than tears cinches my throat.

"I thought it was something I did, or didn't do, or should have done better, something I ate, or my period, or stress.

"Thinking I could fix it with, like, vitamins, or coffee, or cardio, or cutting out carbs, or running so fast I could outrun it ... which sounds pretty stupid now,

"But it just feels like all these folks—
at school, at colleges
I haven't even applied to yet,
not to mention you, Mom ..."

I count squares on the floor.

"Are counting on me to be perfect."

Mom fumbles for a tissue.

A raindrop slides down the windowpane.

"Plus, I'm like you, Mom.

I thought if I didn't say anything, it would go away.

"Even now.

After all this,

I just want to believe ...

make believe

it's not there."

"You know what, Chess?"

The Orange Croc Doc leans closer still.

"When you're in remission,
you may not have to make believe.

You may not notice
any symptoms at all.

"And, Chess, we may not know for certain what triggers this disease, but one thing's for sure:

It's nothing

you did

or didn't do."

Mom blows her nose.

"And another thing,"
my Orange Croc Doc says
as we all stand to go.

"The upside
of these autoimmune diseases?

Most of the time, you look just fine.

"Which can be a drag
if you're looking for sympathy,
but it means you can decide
how much you want to say.
To whom, And when."

"And can I run again?"

"Why not?

You may have to take it easy

for now. Start out slow.

But yes. Go for it!

Go back to your life.

Do everything

you can sensibly do."

"But how will I know?"

"Chess.

You're not in this alone."

Mom's nodding,

nodding.

Nodding.

Slower than the doc texting as he walks,

Slower than the squashed-hair lady in her bunny slippers,

Slower than the guy trying to keeping his gown from flapping open while he trudges with his pole,

Silently, holding hands, Mom and I tromp the hall. **"O**h, my goodness!

Mom drops my hand, stops walking.

"I totally forgot ..."

Digs from her purse a padded envelope.

"This was left for you at the nurses' station this morning."

Inside, with a note rubber-banded around it, is my phone.

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For an instant I'm back on the island, in his arms, in a swoon of such deliciousness ...
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"Excuse me, sugar."

A cart piled high with dishes pulls up beside us.

"You didn't fill out your menu for tomorrow," says the meal lady.

Till the spasms, the stink, the ...

And yet
he drove
an hour
to Albany
to bring me this.

She hands me a stubby pencil.

"I won't be here tomorrow."

"But you'll be here for breakfast.

And by the time they get your discharge sent up, you might be wanting lunch."

cold cereal

hot meat loaf sandwich

cream of broccoli

cream of wheat

Words dance before my eyes.

"No dessert, hon? We've got apple pie."

And now why is Mrs. Murch here, asking if she can get some breakfast.

Anything will do. Her son-in-law

was supposed to be here hours ago.

He's never late, and by the way,
wasn't Mom in her English class?

She never forgets a face. Oh, and ...

"I don't think so," Mom says.

"I went to school in Colonie.

We were just headed to the bathroom.

So if you'll excuse us, Mrs. Murch ..."

She gives me her Nana eyebrow, whispers: "Meet you back in the room.

Go read your note."

so lucky still on the rock

crevicey thing

even so

battery

vacuum cleaner noodle

bag of rice rotate

to you sooner if

My eyes race past the words to his P.S.:

Anyway. It seems to be OK now.

Hope you're OK too.

David

To his P.P.S.:

Did I ever thank you for
remembering the guitar?? The
way it rained
that night it would have been deader
than the phone.

To the wings

he's drawn

around his number.

Heart galloping,

I boot up the phone.

Thumbs bumbling, type the numbers.

Read, reread his note.

What to say

to match his tone?

Thanks.

Too dry?

Or is dry good?

Did I hit send too soon?

I'm much better, thanks!
Getting out tomorrow!

Two texts,

two exclamation points,

too eager?

Like I'm hinting

I want to see him?

Do I?

In the mirror,
skin blue as skim milk,
hands purply
with IV bruises,
bloated belly,
jutting collarbones.

And yet ...

"Chess?"

Mom's knocking on the bathroom door. "You've been in there a long time."

"l'm-"

The text chime rings.

Wasn't sure u'd want to see anyone so I just dropped it at the desk.

That was so nice of u.

I was kinda worried about it so went to look the next day and put back the canoe we hijacked © Got yr jacket too, btw.

"Chessie? Sweetie?"

U swam out there?

Duh.

"I'm okay, Mom.

You don't have to stand outside the door.

How 'bout I meet you in the room?"

Was with my dad all weekend.

I told u he lives near the lake.

O, right.

He thought i couldn't fix it.

The noodle dessicant did it.

What's noodle dessicant?

How long can we keep talking about the phone?

I know I already said sorry about that night but at least I got yr phone working again.

He knows.

He has to know.

u don't have to be sorry.
It wasn't u it wasn't me.
I seem to have a disease.

No reply.

Night beetles begin to fly.

David don't worry. U can't catch it. © 🖯

and if ur getting out u must be ok but why didn't yr friends say something to me besides u were in the hospital and giving me looks like i was some kind of evil demon.

I told them not to talk to u. Didn't want anyone to know.

My cell rings.

"Listen," he says.

"I never say stuff like 'be there for you,' but how can your friends be there for you if they don't know what's going on?"

"Friend?"

The word prickles in my nose, mists my eyes.

"Hello?

Chess, you there?"

Inod

as if he can see.

"I was a little worried, you know.

I mean ... it's not exactly

what I had in mind for the night."

Before Monitor Me can stop me, I'm saying:

"You know what my friend Shannon would say to that? No shit!" "So my friend David?
Who I was with that night?
Who fixed my phone?"

I feel the heat of Mom's wanting to know everything fighting her not wanting to screw up what we've started.

And though all I want is to climb under the covers, replay the good parts, delete the bad parts, maybe cry, I perch on her chair arm, rest my head on her shoulder.

She scoots over
to make room in the chair,
lifts an arm around me.
I nestle down beside her.

"He lives in Hillsdale, Mom.

And he's working at Sugar Snap Farm

for a year so he can save enough

for college. He's really smart, Mom. And really nice. And I don't know when yet, but I'm pretty sure I'm gonna see him. "And I need you to know. What everyone thought happened that night? It wasn't what happened." "I know. I found the dress in the trash. I washed it. Don't worry, Chess. It came out fine." "When I give it back to Lexie do I have to tell her?" "You don't have to tell anyone anything you're not ready to tell." So ... if I don't feel like talking to anyone

for a while?"	
Her arm tightens	
around me.	
"It's okay."	
"It sucks being sick."	
"Truly," she says.	
rruly, site says.	
Inod	
into her armpit.	
Keep on	
nodding.	

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"Yo!
      NO CRYING HERE!"
"Oh. Sorry, Shannon.
Did I wake you?"
      "And what'd I tell you
      about that sorry shit?
      "You're not sorry.
      You told me yourself.
      You're pissed as hell.
      Like me."
"So I was right! You did hear
what I told you in the night!"
      "Yeah. Now you gonna open
      that curtain and
      tell me what I've missed
      these past two days,
      or what?"
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"So ... did you hear

the other stuff?

"The gross stuff?

About what happened?"

"Yeah. Bummer."

"Well, I just talked to him.

He knows, Shannon.

He saw.

And I think he still

wants to be with me."

Many texts, some chats, plans made, a lot of laps, bad food, a nap.

A tube removed, some hobbling bathroom walks, some sitting up, a lot of naps.

Sweet dreams of going home.

"Shannon? Y'awake?

"Listen. I don't want you to be disappointed if he's not, like, movie-star hot or outwardly amazing."

"Who're you telling?
I'm not the one in luuvv and shit.
I'm not even gonna see the dude."

"To someone who doesn't know him, he might be kind of gawky. Possibly a little geeky."

"Geekier than you?"

"But with the warmest, darkest eyes.

Hair the color of caramel,

that like curls down around—"

"So you're saying you're in geek lust."

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"Yes. No.
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I don't know.

No. It's way more."

"You really think you meet some boy and ... boom! The world is beautiful! Your trouble's gone!

"No. No. I know.

But ..."

It ain't like that.

Except in songs."

"So, besides the famous Anthony Morabito, you never fell in love at first sight?"

"Only with my daughter."

"What about her father?"

A noise like air whooshing out of a balloon.

"So you wanna see her picture?"
Holding her belly, wincing
with each step,

She hobbles to my side.

On her phone, I see

Joya sprawled on an afghan,
in felt antlers;

In a Valentine's Day onesie. grinning in a baby bouncer; Running through a sprinkler, mischief in her eyes;

In the plump arms of a smiling red-haired lady.

"Oh wow. She looks

like you.

She's beautiful.

"Your other grandmother looks nice, too."

Isound

so lame.

"Here's me.

I told you I was hot, right?"

Shannon, prom queen shiny in a silver, slitted strapless gown stiletto sandals;

Shannon, mugging for the camera, giant sunglasses, ginormous hoop earrings;

Shannon, in a black puffer, animal-print leggings, on the steps of a white ranch house with green shutters.

"Yeah, I don't live in a trailer anymore, case you were wondering.

We've lived here since we left my dad.

"Who won't be drunk or back here, I'm guessing till next weekend, when you're long gone. Case you were worried."

There's so much

I want to ask, say, but

I don't want to stop

her talking, so

I thumb to the next picture:

Shannon leaning into
a buff, buzz-haired, smiling guy
in an army uniform,

Red-and-blue striped tee stretched tight over her belly,

No hint of sick or dragon in her eyes. **"Y**eah. I didn't need to think about being sick then.

Look at me: I had it so in control.

"And he was all patting my belly and shit about being a father. Till I stopped taking my meds. Which I already knew was a bad idea

"Cuz I was already kinda flaring even on the meds, but I didn't want anything messing up my baby.

"So my mom'd fill the prescriptions and I'd flush 'em. Lie.

And for a while,
even when it got bad again,

"I didn't miss one day of school, showed up for my job at the vet clinic every Saturday, telling myself "It wasn't the Crohn's,
just being pregnant. Cuz I read
Crohn's takes a time-out sometimes
when you're pregnant.

"Except the only time-out I got was in the damn hospital.

On the damn tubes and evil juice again.

"Which, as you can see from the pictures, didn't mess up Joya, thank God, but ...

"TMI, right?

"Only reason I'm telling
you is so if you ever think
about stopping your meds,
no matter how much you hate
taking them, you'll think of me
and know
it's the dumbest

stupidest, most asinine thing you could do."

"Chess? You still awake?"

"Yeah."

"Whatcha doing?"

"Lying here.

Staring at the ceiling."

"Before?

When I said

I didn't care

about Joya's father?"

"Yeah.

I know."

"Chess? What time is it?"

"Twenty past three."

"I could use a bowl of that ice cream around now."

"Me too."

SEVENTH DAY

"Look at you,
all dressed and ready to go
before they've even come
to draw your blood. That's one thing
you won't miss, I know!"

Celandine, the night aide, smiles as she takes my very last vitals.

"You better tell your mom to feed you up. That or buy you smaller pants.

"And how you doing, Miss Shannon? Looks like you're getting some of the old sparkle in your eye."

"Still here. Still me.

Don't ask

About the gas."

"I don't wanna hear the G-word," she warns the surgeons.

"And don't tell me it's Job One,"
she tells the duck brigade.

"I got my daughter to get back,
my GED, get my ass to college
so I can be a doctor
like you guys, only better."

"It's fuckin' gas.
It's passed before,
it'll pass again."

"Hey. I hear someone's leaving us," says Dr. Nguyen on his way out.

"Bet you can't wait

To kiss this place good-bye."

Shannon turns her TV on.

Even through the curtain I can feel her eyes.

"Is it weird to hug your doctor?" I ask the Orange Croc Doc when she officially declares me good to go.

With a "Hmmph!"

worthy of Mrs. Murch

as she trudges to the bathroom,

Shannon tells her IV pole,

"Next she's gonna be talking

about hugging me."

"Don't bring my lunch.

I'm outta here," I tell the lady
who comes to take away
my breakfast tray.

"The only reason I'm still here is my mom has to stop by her office before she can drive up to get me."

Shannon turns her TV louder.

"I won't be needing that,"
I tell Green Jacket Man
when he parks a wheelchair
beside my bed.

"Thank you for taking such good care of my trash," I tell the cleaning man.

"I'm leaving today.

I'm going—"

"YO! NEWSFLASH, CUPCAKE!

WE KNOW THAT! EVERYONE

IN THIS HOSPITAL

KNOWS THAT!

"WANT ME TO RENT THE

GOODYEAR BLIMP

SO THE WHOLE WORLD

WILL KNOW?"

 \mathbf{A} few laps around the nurses' station. Check my phone. Think about texting Bri or Lexie. Decide it might feel easier when I get home. Inspect myself in the bathroom mirror. How many times can one person pee? Check my phone. Try on my other sweats, the other tops, twist my hair up, braid tiny braids,

try to tie my hair back

with my hospital bracelet,
which I probably should not
have bit, sawed, nipped
with my nail clippers,
because now some alarm
might go off
when I try to leave.

"Shannon. Why does my hair look so bad? It looked so good yesterday.

"These pants are so baggy!
Like I've got on, like, Pampers ..."

Her TV's blasting now.

I yank open the curtain.

I grab her clicker.

Kill the sound.

"HEY!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"Shannon. I don't mean to be annoying you."

"Yeah? Well, you're like the dogs in our kennel, pacing in their cages, ears up, tongues dangling, butts wiggling. I'm surprised you don't bark anytime anyone goes past!

It's setting off my evil juice!"

"I'm setting off my evil juice. Sorry."

"And what'd I tell you about apologizing!"

"How 'bout 'We don't take stress, we give stress'?"

"Yeah, well, don't give your stress to me!

"Yeah. Hey. It's Shannon,"

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she calls into the intercom.
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"Could somebody please come in here and unhook me?"

"Where you going?"

"For a walk.

"I'm supposed to be walking.

So I'm taking a walk."

"What if Mom comes

and you're not here?

No. Never mind.

No worries. Go ahead.

We'll find you."

"For what?"

"So you and I can ...

you know ..."

"Are you not hearing me?

For what? A month from now

we could pass each other

on the street and never know.

"And don't gimme some shit about how sorry you are to be leaving.
Cuz if it was me?
And I was leaving you here?
I'd be like, 'Bye!' "

"Yes. And I'd get it.

Because we're friends, you and me.

And you're not just my friend, okay?

What Joyce, the nurse, said yesterday?

About don't be a hero?

I don't mean this to sound cheesy,

but you really are my—"

"YO! NURSE! KELLIANNE! ARE WE WALKING, OR WHAT?" I can't remember feeling this glad to see my mom since the first week of preschool.

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"Excuse me."
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We're just gathering up my bags when Kellianne walks through the door.

"Shannon said don't wait.

She said something might be ... you know ..."

Comes closer, drops to a half whisper:

"About to happen. Gas-wise.

"She thought it might not be that cool for you if she stuck around.

"Oh, wait! That's her, buzzing me now!"

"Do not hug me.

I don't do huggy."

"Too bad." I hold on till Shannon's arms tighten around me.

When she lets go,
in purple pen I scribble
my contact info on her hand,

Dragon-eye her right back as I pass the pen to her.
"Now I need yours."

As Mom rolls

my unnecessary mandatory wheelchair toward the elevator,

I hear:

"Do I need that brave little 'you're my hero' shit?

A, I may be short, but I am not little.

B, no brave about it. You do what you do and you get through.

Which I will do.

"Now Job One's done,
it's time to get myself cute again,
get my driver's license,
get my daughter home with me ...

"And how's she expect me to call her when she can't even write the numbers so you can read 'em?

"Hey, Kellianne, Is that a four or a nine?"

AFTER

In starry dark a girl sings while a boy strums his guitar.

Her new running shoes flash as they jog through coppery October light.

In a booth

close to the bathroom

in an old Chinese restaurant

Two girls share

pistachio ice cream

with a little girl here for the holidays.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucy Frank won a PEN/Phyllis Naylor Working Writer Fellowship for her work on *Two Girls Staring at the Ceiling*. The author of eight novels for young adults and middle graders, she divides her time between New York City and upstate New York. Learn more at lucyfrank.com.