

Shaving Cream

In the morning I watch Baba's slow limp to the bathroom. Both he and the door creak as he heaves it open, and he stumbles as his foot catches on the lip of the threshold. For a moment, I consider the bruise that will spread across his shin like an amoeba, before it yellows, shrivels, and fades, but he does not fall. Baba pulls his other leg over the ledge, and the door clicks shut by itself.

I go to the window and yank at the blinds. They catch on their rusty hinges and hang stubbornly, half-drawn. Stark sunlight crawls into the room, but it seems too weary to reach into the far corners. Shadows roil in the deep creases of the sheets rumped on the hospital bed. I notice, not for the first time, that there are whorls of fingerprints and strands of hair trapped in the plastered walls. The stench of ammonia lances up my forehead, and I pinch at the bridge of my nose until the headache reduces to a dull thrum between my eyes; smells in the hospital room come in waves like the patients, crumbling away without notice, then returning with different names and faces and unchanging symptoms—old age, failing organs, persistent melanoma.

Turning, I remember that the nurse said to me yesterday to check on Baba more often, so I tap on the bathroom door with two knuckles. Then, I remind myself he's hard of hearing, so I call out, "Baba?"

There's no reply.

I push the door open anyway and find Baba standing at the sink, his eyes purple and baggy, his cheeks covered in shaving cream. He turns the faucet on and lets the water run until it's warm. His nose dangles like a lump of melting candle wax when he hunkers over.

"Have you used the toilet, Baba?" I ask him.

"Yes," he says, squinting at the mirror as he brings a razor up to his face.

The toilet has not been flushed. I push down the handle, and it wheezes, swallows, and spits back up.

“Do you want me to help?” I hold my hand out for the razor.

Baba doesn't move. “No.” he says. The razor makes its shaky journey down the snow-covered slope.

I watch him tremble as he shaves stroke by stroke, the razor rasping from his cheekbone to his gulping Adam's apple. Baba nicks himself a few times, but he doesn't bother to rinse the cuts. His blood turns the shaving cream pink, like the frosting on a birthday cake.

Baba's gaze wanders once he's halfway done, drops from the mirror to the counter of the sink, where there's a paper cup with two toothbrushes, a tube of travel-size toothpaste, a bar of soap, and the old picture frame. The frame is three by four, the size of Baba's heart, and it holds a grainy photo of him and my mother on their third wedding anniversary. I'm not yet born, and they clink champagne glasses, laughing. My mother, dressed in royal blue, has her pinky finger sticking out.

Baba picks up the photograph, and I watch in the mirror as the blue films around his irises seem to expand, as if he's aging before my eyes. I'm not sure how long he stands over the sink gripping the picture in his left hand and his razor in the right, looking like a retiring Father Christmas with his half-beard of shaving cream, but when I step forward and tug the razor from his hand, it falls away without protest.

“The nurse will come by soon, Baba,” I say, shaving his other cheek clean. “You'll want to be ready.”

The photograph lies flat in both of his palms. He does not cry, and he carries it back to his bed.