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STELLA

On day three, they took her to solitary. Day six, they gave up on sedatives. But it wasn't until the eleventh day that Stella stopped crying. A week and four full days of solid tears. It took three more days for the swelling in her eyes to go down enough that she could look around. Stella found herself in a twelve-by-twelve foot room surrounded on all sides by cement, interrupted only by one small opening. It was here that a kind woman had been placing food three times a day since Stella had arrived, and here that the woman picked up the untouched trays. Each time, she leaned her face into the breach in the wall to ask Stella how she was doing. It was on one of these days that Stella finally spoke up. But hearing the hysterical woman ask when she would see her son again was too much for the kind woman, who dropped her eyes and said she softly that didn't know.

After that, Stella stopped keeping track of time altogether.

If she didn't know whether it was morning or evening, she wouldn't have to count another day without his smile or another night without his bedtime story. If she didn't realize that a Saturday had passed, she could pretend that she hadn't missed his first soccer game or a trip to the ice cream shop. If she let a week slip by without counting, it

took some of the sting out of the knowledge that her son was one week older and she couldn't be there to see the changes time had wrought, whether his round cheeks had slimmed with the passing days or his ebullient energy been curbed by her inexplicable absence. If Stella didn't think about time, she might make it through.

Stella had been brought to the Center after being picked up in a raid on the sewing factory where she worked. From the very start, she sobbed wildly, begging to be let go, screaming that she had a child. Most of the women had children, some of them grandchildren, but none screamed like Stella did. At first, the others tried to comfort her, telling her to be quiet and wait, that it was the only thing she could do. But something had taken hold of Stella the moment she saw the officials enter the dingy room where she had been sewing since early that morning, a blinding rage the likes of which she had never felt before grabbed hold of her and stayed, so that she could only scream and flail her arms, begging them to take her to her son. When the other women began to realize that their ministrations had no effect on her, they stopped trying and left Stella to her misery, migrating towards the edges of the large room where they were kept together, each doing her best to fight off the pangs of doubt and hopelessness that Stella's wails had inspired, collectively determined to remain optimistic about their various fates.

The guards were compassionate enough and also tried to quiet Stella, if less wholeheartedly than the women. But it seemed that nothing would quench the endless flow of her tears. Seeing that she was not improving, and haunted by acute memories of the recent scandal surrounding a detainee's death, they had taken her to the infirmary where the doctor on call examined her and deemed Stella completely healthy. He shot her with a sedative and sent her back. Even so, the officials were unwilling to take any more

chances and decided that she needed to be kept alone so as not to disturb the others. It was obvious that if Stella continued, her palpable desperation could incite a riot. So instead of taking her back to the big room, lined on two sides with benches and graced by one long window overlooking a courtyard with a few scraggly trees, they took her to this former cell, the only place suitable for solitary confinement. If Stella stood up, her head grazed the ceiling, and when she needed to go to the bathroom, she was forced to crouch under the small doorway that led to a closet with a toilet.

At first, a nurse came by at regular intervals to administer a sedative, but it soon became clear that its only effect was to make Stella so violently ill that she vomited up the drug and they decided it was wasted on her. She's alone, they thought, and far enough away from the others that they can barely hear her, so what does it matter? And so the guards went back to their regular business and simply made sure that someone went by her cell each day to feed her. That was enough until some authority decided her fate. The men and women who worked at the Center knew well enough that a decision like that could take months, years even, and had learned by default that nothing they did would speed up the process. It was better to stick to their duties, to make sure things ran smoothly and not worry about the rest of it. At some point, the court would get around to assigning the hysterical woman an attorney, as they did with all the detainees, and then she would be someone else's responsibility. Until then, they left her alone.

One day, after she had stopped crying and stopped counting and almost stopped hoping, Stella looked around and saw something she hadn't seen before. Above a purplish stain on the grey wall was a small, square window. How had she missed this before? Like a tiger, Stella crouched, focused, and leapt, crashing her weakened body

violently against the cement wall. Lying limp on the floor, she felt a surge of pain but managed to raise herself. Methodically, she shook each part of her body to be sure no bones were broken before she stood up and tried to find the window again. Gazing at the spot where she thought she had seen it, she realized sadly that it was only her imagination playing tricks on her. Stella was crestfallen and would have cried had not all her tears been spent. Instead, she curled herself into a ball, lay her head on her arms, and fell to sleep on the hard floor, dreaming. In her sleep, she saw herself sitting on the edge of her son's bed as he lay sleeping and a profound calm wafted into her cells.

After a long while, Stella awoke and sat up in the middle of the floor. She sensed that something was different but she didn't know what it was. A deep serenity filled her, something so completely unfamiliar that Stella didn't recognize it for what it was and almost broke its tranquil spell in her sheer effort to make sense of the odd, new feeling. But the stillness had a rhythm and power of its own, lulling her to stay exactly where she was as it seeped like a cool river into the frantic heat of her mind and heart, quieting her fears and soothing her anxieties for the first time since that day in the sewing factory. Giving into the feeling, Stella closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she felt that she could breathe for the first time in days. She relaxed a little bit, allowing herself to believe that she would get out of here one day soon and be with her son again.

As she gazed again at the space on the wall, she wondered about her window. It wasn't there, she knew that well, but now she let herself imagine that it was. What might it look like, Stella asked herself, seeing in her mind's eye a perfect square lined with deep blue velvet where the wall was cut away. It wouldn't have glass, she decided, and could almost feel a warm breeze floating into the room, filling the stuffy space with fresh air

scented with jasmine, like the sweet smell that eased through their windows at home from the flower bush outside their apartment. She can just see her son bounding into her room the first time the plant burst into bloom, shouting “It’s springtime!” Settling into the carefree joy of the memory, Stella imagines a bright white crescent moon hovering in the space of the window and her mouth curves into a smile for the first time in many months, the shape of it echoing the arc of the moon, the muscles of her face cramping with the sheer unfamiliarity of the movement.

After this, each time the woman leaves a plate of colorless food, Stella eats it slowly, leaving the plate empty for the first time since her captivity began and thus slowly gaining back color in her cheeks and weight on her body. Finishing her meal, she replaces the clean plate in the opening in the wall and sits down in the middle of the floor. Closing her eyes, Stella conjures her fictional window, its soft blue-black nighttime framing the changing shape of a magical moon. From crescent to quarter to half, she begins to remember what it means to hope, the imaginary scene painting an improbable crutch for grounding. It is many more weeks before an attorney is assigned to Stella’s case, and many more after that until the appointed counsel comes to visit her, paving the way for her eventual hearing. For most of this time, Stella remains alone, in the small, grey, windowless room, waiting. She still doesn’t know the time of day or night, or how long it has been since she has seen her son, but gradually, her frenzy abates.

At regular intervals, she sits with the dreamy moon, letting its light seep into her heart and bones, giving her strength to go on. When the moon waxes full, Stella speaks to the nice woman who brings her food and convinces her that she is getting better, asking to be returned to the other women. Like everything in the Center, her request takes time

to process, but Stella knows it is the first step to whatever is to come next and she waits patiently, observing the moon wane. Each time she watches, she sees small curves cut away from the glowing orb like a diminishing ice cream cone her son is savoring. As her moon shifts gradually from full to half to quarter to crescent, Stella gains weight and insight. When she is not bathing in its shimmering light, she takes time to consider what will happen when she is released, determined to put up a fight to stay in this country to care for her son. When the moon finally fades to the mystical new moon, camouflaged by the deep blue sky, Stella knows that the window will ease back to the solidity of concrete. She waits, watching velvet curtains pull across the hole in the wall until the space above the purplish stain closes up once again.

Soon afterwards, the woman who brings the food tells Stella that someone is here to see her. She leads her down a hall and past several large rooms where the other detainees are kept together, and to which Stella will return for the short time remaining until her hearing, and into a big room filled with picnic benches. Potted plants line the walls and windows overlook an asphalt yard. The morning sun pouring through the windows is too much for Stella. She squeezes her eyes shut and doesn't notice the small boy sitting alone at a table in the middle of the room. "Mama!" he shouts, jumping up. Hearing his voice, Stella breaks free from the grip on her arm and runs towards him.