

JESSICA COHN-KLEINBERG

The Skeleton Girls

The air tastes like dandelions.

We watch the pink grow in the sky like blood in water. But it's in slow motion. It's as if the world holds its breath at dawn, like it wants to hold onto the night for just one second longer. And then all around us the forest takes its first breath, a living thing.

This is why we are here.

The sun peeks around the horizon, slowly bathing us in golden light. The chirping of awakening birds is heard as they sing merry little songs. Magic.

I envy those birds, the ones spreading their wings and gliding through the clouds like kites cut from their strings. I could follow the paths they leave in the clouds all day.

What I would give to fly. I'm told this is an ordinary wish, the wish for flight. Everyone wants to fly. But I think my reason is special. No one wants to fly the way I want to.

Next to me Grace smiles. The amount of pain she's in makes it more of a grimace. But she wouldn't take the pain pills she had on her. She wanted this moment to be clear, even the pain.

"Isn't it lovely?" In the distance we can hear the sounds of traffic. Close, but belonging to another time, another place.

"It should be." I whisper, trying to keep the mood. She slides me a sideways glance like she's trying to see around her cataracts but nods her head. She understands. It is our last dawn after all.

Our feet swing over the cliff, dancing in the air. Our thin legs of yarn float in a growing breeze. The place we chose is called Dead Man's Point. Apt, we thought. As the sun climbs the sky bit-by-bit, we sit in silence. Something so scarce these last couple of years.

Hospitals aren't places for quiet reflection. Even hospices, like the ones we would have to go to—they are places where the dead go to die. They have so many questions there. They can't realize we no longer need words. We are past that. There are the nurses, the patients, the visitors, and always the crying. Then there's the praying. Those whispered prayers for our safe passage

into the hands of God. We seemed to be some stop on a religious school's fieldtrip. Small children came into our rooms with flowers and crosses to tell us that Jesus loves us.

I tried not to spit on them.

The worst for me was the cold, clean smell of death. Everything smelled like an antiseptic lie. It wasn't a place you wanted to die in.

When my roommate passed, I mentioned my thoughts to Grace at our meeting. "I don't want to die with the smell of bleach in my nose." Grace looked at me then. Although I was the only one she spoke to, most of the time she just stared into space. I have no idea what was so important there, but it had all of her attention. Maybe she was reviewing her life. Watching it like a screen on a blank wall. And it was a long life. I think. Cancer steals our youth, but hers was long gone by the time it got to her. Anyway, she seemed to do nothing but look blankly into the air. They called it catatonia. But this one time she really looked at me. I remember thinking her grey eyes could see through stone. She simply said, "Then let's not."

We didn't want to let it happen. And it would happen. There was no doubt. Stage four cancer for the both of us. Lucky, I know. And we didn't just accept it because of what the doctor said. No, we knew because our bodies told us in the way that bodies do: through aches and pains and sighs and groans. The cancer was a hungry thing. It slowly ate away at us till we looked like scarecrows: nothing more substantial than straw and able to frighten small children with a smile. Grinning death, I thought, is never pretty.

Grace even started to look like a skull. All bald and bones. The bald part was her choice. She shaved it all off before the chemo.

"I wanted it to be my decision," she told me.

I didn't get it, back then. My head was still covered in thin, brittle strands of blonde. More straw. It may have looked hideous, but it was my hair, and I wasn't giving it up. It was my choice, like shaving her head was Grace's. In the end it comes down to choices. The ones we can make and the ones made for us. Too many choices had been made for us. So many things had been taken away. But today is our day. Today I understand Grace's urge to get rid of her hair before the chemo took it.

"Jenny." She takes my hand gently. Our bones clink together like a grotesque wind chime. "It's time. Ready?"

I give her a weak laugh.

“Never.”

Both of us share a smile. We weren't friends. We didn't even know each other that well. We met in group counseling for the terminally ill at St. John's. All of us were too caught up in our own pain to really care about reaching out. Those sessions were like diaries. They were meant to be a place we could empty our thoughts, nothing more.

But here, we don't need friends. They would be the ones telling us we were crazy, trying to stop us. They would try their hardest to get us to go back to the bleach rooms and the Jesus children. Because they are selfish, the way only love can be. We just need this, someone who knows.

She takes my face and presses her cracked lips against both of my eyelids. I think they are kisses.

I stand up a bit unsteadily. My limbs are weak, and I sway more than I'd like. When the world rights itself, I help Grace to her feet. I know it hurts her, but she shows no pain as she rises.

Standing next to each other, we keep our hands clasped. I get the silly image of two skeleton girls playing red rover with death. My laughter is stronger this time.

She rattles out a deep breath as if deflating a balloon. “Do you think there's anything on the other side?” For a second she seems like a child, scared of the boogiemán.

Death: the great equalizer.

I squeeze her hand. She winces.

“Yes. There's no pain.”

She smiles.

She is beautiful.

Together we close our eyes. And on the silent count of three we step off the edge of the world. Our nightgowns flutter like wings, and the air embraces us. We are home. I think our laughter can be heard by people miles away.

And for a second I don't envy the birds.