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The Wheelchair

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The Wheelchair

I sort of wake up and they're all saying stuff like *Matt, how are you feeling or you really had us scared for a while there man*, you know, the usual bullshit from the movie they probably saw last night. Almost everybody's here. Jeff, Dan, Chuck, Alex, my mother, my little brother, Aunt Susan, her husband.

When my little brother asks me if I can remember how it felt, Aunt Susan squeezes his shoulder hard. He winces and shuts up. Everyone else is smiling at me like the girl who sleeps at your apartment but won't tell you she's been fucking one of your friends for the past week.

The scene is finally starting to sink in. But it's not the cold potatoes and spinach on the plastic tray and the nurse who wipes my ass twice a day. I mean, I can literally feel it inside of me, sucking me deeper into the bed until I can barely see over the metal railing at the far end. It's OK; these days I like being numb.

Laura visits me at night. I don't know how she gets by the security guard and the doctors, but she does. She gets in on the right side of the bed because she likes to lie on her left side. That way, if I fall asleep and start to snore, she can tickle my stomach until I wake up. Then she kisses my cheek. I laugh when I see she's wearing my Grateful Dead T-shirt like she used to do. It's so big on her that she doesn't have to put on any shorts.

I ask her why she doesn't come visit at normal times like everyone else. She smiles and rubs her face against my neck. I don't think she ever answers my questions.

Instead, we talk about stuff from a couple years ago, when we first met. Laura keeps reminding me about this one time after we graduated high school. We're at a party at Jackson Smith's beach house in Westport, and somehow we end up sitting together by the water after everybody else falls asleep or passes out.

Nobody notices as I hurry through the gate, past the lighthouse, and onto the beach. We stop when we get about three feet from the water. It's low tide and the air smells like salt and shit. We lay back and look out across Long Island Sound.

Aside from the smell, this beach really is beautiful. A string of piled

rocks forms a black line that looks like it stretches out for miles. Some boulders poke their heads out of the water a few yards away. For a second I want to swim out to one of them. The rippling of each wave makes a silver streak that lasts for a second under the moonlight. Even though there's a full moon, the stars shine brighter than I've ever seen in the suburbs. Laura pulls on my arm.

"Do you believe in God, Matt?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Well, whenever I sit on the beach at night and all I can see are the stars and the water, I feel like I'm inside a huge dome, like I'm in one of those little snow globes that you shake and all the plastic snow falls on the town. The stars are like the snowflakes, except they don't move. Then I start to wonder what's behind those stars. I can almost see a giant hand holding the globe, and a pair of eyes looking down, trying to figure out what's going on inside."

"That's scary. What if it wanted to shake the globe? We'd be screwed."

"Yeah, but when I look at the stars, I feel the opposite. It's almost like the hand is keeping us steady, just looking at what it's holding and wishing everything could stay just like it is now."

While she's talking, she slips her hand into mine. Her fingers are so small but they lock in perfectly. Her skin is hot and sandy and I can feel her pulse. We look up at the sky for a while, not saying anything.

Her eyes reflect the moonlight hitting the waves. I'm swimming in them. But I don't have too much time to enjoy it because she's kissing my lips and neck, running her hands through my hair. Her mouth tastes like cigarettes and vodka. I look up at the stars again for a second and breathe in the salty air that suddenly smells incredible.

Sometimes I tell my mother about our conversations and she doesn't believe me. She says that Laura's at school, that she's four hundred miles away, how could she be here, but I think my mother's full of shit.

[*Chris Vola*]