

V. Signs

When I found V., more dead than alive, I carried her to my car.

What was I driving then? I don't remember. I remember trying to lift her up. Her eyes were open and absent. Her eyes were--

I remember trying not to panic. I felt this seething sort of anger but put it on a shelf. It could wait. I turned to the phone, changed my mind, and turned to her. She needed to get up. I put my arms under her arms and lifted her from the bed, pulling her to me, forcing her to walk. Her legs were limp and mine were shaking. I held her up and steadied myself, inside and out. The phone was on the table right in front of me, close enough to reach and dial for help, but what if it brought the police? *No cops*, I thought. It was one of our rules.

After a moment or two she revived and lifted her arms around mine, holding on. I moved her, pulled her, made her step across the room, awkward and stumbling, into the living room light and out into the hallway. Halfway down the stairs she gave up again, slumped nearly out of my hands and down the stairs. I caught her against the wall, pinned us there for a moment and held on tight to keep us both from falling. I buried my nose in the smooth skin behind her ear and above her neck, a spot I knew well, smelled her skin, a smell I knew well, and recalled for a moment the nine years that brought us there. I saw the circularity-- my move from savior to lover to father-- to savior again that night. And then I picked her up, carried her over my shoulder, down the stairs and out into the cold night air. Boston in winter.

I carried her down the broken sidewalk to my van parked in the street. My van. I was driving a van then. That was it. And I laid her on the dirty rubber mat in the back and drove. I don't remember much of that drive. Don't remember if I was wedged into my

parking spot and had to maneuver out, or left the curb straight because no one had parked in front of me for a change. I don't remember the potholes I missed or the lights I made.

I remember there was no snow. I remember passing Carney Hospital and driving on to Boston City Hospital, knowing she had no insurance. I remember pulling into the ambulance bay and all the people around, but no one to help as I tried to lift her out of the van. I fell forward once, on top of her, before stepping into the van and carrying her in my arms, like the Pieta, through the double side doors of the van and the big automatic doors of the ER. I carried her through the waiting room, pausing to look quickly at the Saturday night ER, the ragtag array of sick and bored, the smell of waiting, victims twice, the TV on high above. I carried her straight through the middle of it all and into the ER ward itself, where I laid her on the nearest gurney.

Someone who worked there approached. A woman. I said only, *Suicide attempt*, anticipated her question and added quickly, *Some kind of pain killers I think*. My mind raced back to the bedroom. *There was vodka too*.

The nurse was all business, vaguely routined and vaguely annoyed. She took V.'s pulse, asked me her name, then stopped. She looked up in thought, preoccupied, scanned the room with her mind for a second, then looked me in the eyes and said, *Wake her up. Keep her awake. I'll be back in a minute*. And she was gone.

I froze again, near panic again at seeing my work wasn't done, seeing in an instant that this was Boston City Hospital on a Saturday night. Her life was still in my hands. And my voice.

I called her name. My voice sounded weak and strange. I called her again, more loudly, more firmly, conscious of my voice in the ward, and conscious of it blending in with the other noise in the ward, which was considerable, and which I hadn't heard til then. I reached down and pulled her to me, calling her name again and letting my anger rise.

Wake up!

And, *WAKE UP!*

She was groggy but soon I got through. She wanted to sleep, fought against my hold and by instinct I let her win a bit, let her fall back a bit, then pulled her back up. I tried to raise her temper, kept talking, tried to keep her awake by making her hate me. She drifted in and out, would try to fall asleep against me and I'd push her away. Would try to fall back and I'd pull her up. I kept talking, whispering at times, yelling at other times. I'd gain momentum and lose it. Lose my confidence and find it. Kept it up because no one came and I had to. Accepted the task like a lousy job I needed. I didn't think I was doing well until finally a doctor and two nurses came and I realized an hour and a half had passed. And she was still alive.

They fed her charcoal and she threw up black.

I watched. Detached. Exhausted.

I looked around and saw for the first time an old drunk, the curtain around him only partially drawn, his head and knees bleeding. He'd been cursing anyone that passed near, demanding to leave. He had the bed next to ours, shouting away from deep within his fog while I'd been shouting at V. from inside our fog, neither of us more than peripherally aware of the other. And then the other patients, who I could hear but not see. And all the comings and goings of staff. And the smells: rubbing alcohol, latex, blood and vomit. And I thought about what a cliché this whole scene was. I mean, the old Irish drunk yelling *Let me the fuck out*, and kids crying, and the hospital lighting, and the urban sprawl of it all. I couldn't help but think that this wasn't all real, that I wasn't really here, that this wasn't what it was.

But then I looked back at V., the doctor checking things, the charcoal going down, and I knew that this was no cliché or story, knew this was no dream or nightmare. I was here. With her. For this.

And I watched as they removed her shirt and pants. She wore no bra and I saw her breasts, the breasts I'd known so well, the breasts I'd kissed in different times and different lights. And they grounded me from the electric strangeness all around, stayed in my mind after the nurses covered them with the hospital gown, and connected me to the person I knew, lying there, even as everything else around was working overtime to objectify and clinicize her as just another patient, just another suicide, on just another Saturday night at Boston City.

The doctor, an alert woman my age who was trying hard to see me and V. as real people, told me V. would be fine, but I had to keep her awake a while longer. She told me I had to feed her more charcoal, and told me, with her eyes and expression, that people were still dying here and V.'s life, stable now, was up to me. Again.

So I did.

Through the night. Force feeding her at times. Holding her close. Letting her throw up all over herself and me. Constantly talking. Yelling at her when she began to drift. Other times telling her stories of my recent days. Catching her up on the news of friends, catching her up because she had been away and had returned, as withdrawn and defeated and alone as I'd ever seen her, just days before.

Sometime after 8 AM they told me she could sleep.

I still had the doctor to talk to, and psych, and the billing people. Later in the morning she was admitted, brought upstairs to the psych ward, where the doctors talked to both of us for another two days while her stomach healed, and they tried to get her to check herself into an institution, which she angrily rejected. Later they tried to check her in by force, and she stopped talking to the doctors, said to them only, *Let me the fuck out*. She tried to leave, and they tied her down.

When the doctors weren't around, when only I was around, she begged me to support her, to tell them I would take responsibility for her. She promised me she'd never do it again, that she'd begin again, go back to school, and quit drinking.

And of course I knew it was bullshit and of course I did it anyway. I lied and cajoled and convinced the doctors to let her out, signed her out against their advice, because I knew that a mental hospital for her was rock bottom, lower than death, and I couldn't stand to see her suffer like that. Not anymore. Not ever. Even if it was what we both needed.

All of this lay just ahead. But when on that early Sunday morning the beautiful woman doctor, who was my age, who if I'd met at a party of a friend I'd be trying to get to know, came to me and said V. could sleep for a while, I said only *Are you sure?* And I didn't try any longer to separate myself from the destitute, desperate, or simply poor and sick carnival of humanity around me. V. was *my* patient then, and I released her only when assured by the doctor, who I didn't fully trust, despite her authority, that she was going to be ok.

I walked through the waiting room and out to the ambulance bay, the telltale charcoal smeared across my shirt, looking like a suicide try myself. I didn't care. I went to my van, which I'd expected to be gone but which was still there, the doors closed by someone else.

I got a cigarette from the dashboard. And I sat on the loading dock and smoked.

The sun was up, of course, and it was a cold, clear winter morning. Exhaust and donut smells wafted across the street, mixed with the trash in the gutters and urine smelling alleys, and swirled around me like old friends, or old ghosts.

The bitter cold felt good. Soothing.

In the years that passed since that night and morning, V. kept her promises, I think, though we fell out of touch a few years ago. When last we spoke she had quit drinking, met a good man she planned to marry, and returned to school. The last time I saw her the tables were turned and she was giving me advice, showing me signs I failed to heed though I knew at the time I should. Amazing and strange.

Smoking cigarettes that morning though, I thought back to the way I had found her that night. To the way things connected. To the signs I missed, and the often simple nature and routine flavor of signs themselves. This is the part of the story that I keep turning over and over in my mind, and it is the set of images that I'm sure I will carry through the years. It was there on the dock, smoking without a coat in the cold morning air, that I first began to really see the things that happened. How, for instance, her return to me a few days earlier had been a return to die in the only safe place she'd ever known. And how it was me not catching on, me not reading the signs in the very peculiar flavor of her arrival that time, that told her that even I was lost to her. In the few days she'd been back things between us had been going badly. I was sick of being her refuge, sick of her endless spiral into self destruction, and sick, mostly, of its imposition on my life. I was too busy to see. I knew she was down, way down, and still I'd been mean.

When I got home that night, around 8, the place was dark and I thought she was gone. I was happy. I knew if she was out on a Saturday night I probably wouldn't see her for a few days. Things between us had come to that.

I fell asleep on my couch but woke with a start around 10. Something was wrong, something strange but something also familiar. It's hard to describe, and I don't really need or want to, but I knew, there alone on my couch in the dark, without a shadow of doubt that she was dying.

I went to my spare room, where she'd been sleeping the last few days, and looked in. The light from the hallway illuminated the cot in the room, and her lying on it. Her feet

were on the floor, her head raised towards me by the pillow. There were pills on the carpet and an empty vodka bottle on the nightstand.

I called her name. Her eyes shot open and looked directly at me. It was not normal consciousness. Her eyes were wide and wild and scared. They were familiar and strange, still alive and already dead. They looked at me and through me. I don't believe but still I'd swear that it was some god or angel that stepped in, that opened both of our eyes to the signs we'd ignored. Just in time. I've seen nothing like her eyes that night before or since, and thinking of them now still makes me shiver.

She didn't move at all but held my gaze for a moment or two, until her eyes knew they had me, and in a hoarse whisper she said, *Help me*.

And then everything else happened.