

They're cutting me again.

Their fingers are spreading the wound in my belly.

Things inside me that should have stayed dark are being bathed in the sick white light of fluorescent bulbs.

I cannot scream.

I command my body: Gnash my teeth! Punch my fist through their necks! Break them before they can come with their scalpels again!

No response.

Their fingers fumble around inside me, tugging my guts and stringing them out in front of me.

Excited butchers pulling strings of sausage from the grinder.

They shove the slick mess back inside and I feel empty pressure as they staple me shut.

Hours later they roll me back into my room. Through the filthy blinds, the sun shines so brightly it burns my eyes.

I cannot blink.

Visitors come.

My children, all together, for the first time in so long and I'm the wrong reason.

I want so badly to reach out and touch them, to feel my babies' skin and brush back their hair like when they were little. They may be taller now but they're all still little.

When they aren't screaming at each other, debating what they should do next after the nurse lies to them and says this was necessary and after their tears stain my sheets, there's almost peace in the room. My tired mind allows me to feel like we're miles away from the hospital, back home in Jesup. In my living room with walls stained by years of slowly drifting cigarette smoke and my big couch with the springs worn out by countless bouts of wrestling and leaping from the cushions, we are safe. I smell the residual fragrance of onions and chicken in my kitchen, a pot of tea almost ready to boil.

The dream ends and I'm thrust back into the cold. I can't tell them I hear them. I can't tell them that I love them and to stop fighting and love each other with the time they have left.

I beg them to help me but they cannot hear.

My children leave and the day nurses return. Their cracked lips are so close to my skin they nip me with their teeth as they whisper terrible things. They pinch me beneath my gown and cinch my straps. They fill my mouth and ears with tubes and scrape the dressing from my belly with steel wool.

The incredible pain separates my mind from my body and I am back in the dream of my little house with the garden that needs tilling and my son's dog sniffing in the grass.

I'm awake again.

The night nurse sits with me in the dark, staring at me from the corner of the room. The light from the hallway never reaches her face but I can see her there. In the dark, her smile gleams with crooked teeth. Two tiny white dots shine to mark her eyes.

My eyes are frozen dry in their sockets.

I can't look away from her smile.

I fell helping my elderly neighbour out of her wheelchair. It wasn't the first time I'd done so, but this time... I landed in a way that turned my spine. I couldn't move. My neighbour called an ambulance and by the time I made it to the hospital, I was feeling better. Still, I wanted to be safe.

They brought me inside.

When I saw the steel table I knew something was wrong. I tried to fight but the nurse's hands were talons and I was so weak. They laid me down, the surface of the table so cold my skin stuck to its surface when they slid me up upon it. I started bleeding. They cinched me down with leather straps through holes in the table. They shoved pills into my mouth and bound my jaw. They cut a hole in my cheek and shoved a funnel inside, filling my mouth with rancid liquid until I was forced to swallow. The world went dark.

For a while, I was back in my little house, having never left, having never helped my old neighbour. My children were all home.

When I woke, I was here. The room is as cold as an unmarked grave. The night nurse is with me. She tells me how they hollowed me out and are preparing something new to place inside.

She whispered to me from her dark corner, her dead smile glistening.

I hear her voice through that smile that never moves.

Help me.