

October 28th

I'm stuck in this body. And I can't get out.

I stare at my arms. These arms. They're not mine, but I'm wearing them. They're thick and muscular and covered in hair. The veins run like rope down the insides.

I squeeze my eyes shut for the hundredth time, hoping that when I open them, I'll look down and see my own thin arms. My own delicate veins.

I don't.

Oh, God, do I need help. I need help. Now.

I stand and my head spins. Grabbing onto the desk, I wait for the dizziness to pass. Wait for my head to clear. It doesn't happen.

I look from the desk to the bed to the floor to the walls and see where I am. Clarity won't come. Can't come. Because I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

My eyes travel to the mirror and the face staring back in terror. "Please," I say. The face says it back, but sloppily. Like a drunk. "Please," I beg again. "Where are you?" This time the words feel formed. This time my lips, his lips, work the way I expect them to. Or close to it.

But there's no response.

I lift a hand. Take a step. My movements are staccato. Jerky. Clumsy. Like electrodes are flexing these muscles. Not me. Everything about this body is heavy and long. I take another step forward and it's smoother, but I'm not used to the bulk of this body.

And I don't want to get used to it.

I want out. Of him. Of here.

One

August: Life As Usual (yeah, right)

“Rise and shine, Sylvie,” Dr. Hong says, his voice full of forced cheer. “PSG’s done. You have a couple hours of free time before the MSLT. Go crazy.” I open my eyes and the first thing I see is the bramble of silver hairs sticking out of his nose. *Note to self: Buy Dr. Hong nose hair clippers for Christmas.*

He helps me sit up and I look down at myself, feeling like something out of a horror movie. Sticky pads with wires dot my legs and chest. I can’t see the ones above shoulder height, but their glue makes my chin, forehead and the areas around my ears and eyes itch. A heavy ponytail of wires cascades down my back and leads to a machine on my left. Probes tickle my nostrils.

Doc rearranges things and unhooks me so I’m able to walk around. I almost thank him, but catch myself before I do. I’m here because he doesn’t believe me. He’s brought me here to prove himself right. As with all the other tests I’ve taken.

But so far, he hasn’t proven anything. It drives him nuts.

It drives me nuts, too.

I go to the window and open the blinds. Outside, the sun is bright. Another stifling summer day in Wisconsin. Outside, I know the air sticks to your skin like Saran-Wrap and feels thick as cotton wool. I can almost smell the fresh-cut grass, the acrid scent of blacktop burning.

But here, in the lab, it stinks like antiseptic. And it’s dry and cool. The perfect sleeping temperature. That’s what I’m here to do: sleep. It’s the last weekend before school starts, and while everyone else is tanning on the sand, I’m snoozing in a sleep lab.

Talk about social suicide.

Dr. Hong writes something on my chart. “I’m turning you over to the team,” he says. “I think these tests will help us figure it out, Sylvie.” When I don’t respond, he goes on. “You know, the cataplexy – that’s where you have the sudden loss of muscle tone. Then the sleep paralysis ...” Here he looks up from the chart and directly into my eyes. “And, of course, the hallucinations.”

Of course. The hallucinations. I stare back at him without blinking. He breaks the gaze first and I feel a ridiculous sense of victory.

They’re *not* hallucinations. That’s what bothers me the most, what scares me and pisses me off: Dr. Hong insists it’s all make-believe.

“Your mother’s worried about you.” Dr. Hong’s voice is accusing. Like I’ve been giving my mom problems on purpose. If there’s one thing I don’t want, it’s to make my mom worry *more*.

“There haven’t been any more incidents,” I say.

Dr. Hong narrows his dark eyes at me. I know he doesn’t believe me. He never believes me. I might actually be offended – if I were telling the truth.

“Well, that’s wonderful, then. But with all that’s going on—”

“I’m doing fine. Really.” No need for him to play shrink any longer.

He’s silent a moment. Then he says, “Okay, Sylvie.”

“Everything’s set for school?” It’s a yearly ritual. Tests, tests, and more tests. Then the paper that declares me fit to fester in the classrooms of my high school.

“Sure. We don’t need these results to know that. I’ll contact St. Anthony’s and let them know everything’s in order for your –” he picks up my chart and looks at it again “—junior year.” He sticks out his hand and I shake it unenthusiastically.

“I’m sure school will be a lot of fun. You must have the boys lined up.” His eyes crinkle as he tries a smile.

“The only boys lining up are those who are trying to get away,” I say.

It wasn't a joke, but Dr. Hong looks at me and laughs loudly. He throws his head back and I get a direct view up his nostrils.

Note to self: Forget the nose hair clippers. Buy the guy a weed whacker.

After a day full of forced napping, I sit in the waiting room paging through old copies of *Good Housekeeping* while Mom fills out paperwork. Despite hating the lab, I suddenly don't want to leave it. I don't want to go back home.

I throw the copy of *Good Housekeeping* onto the coffee table.

When Mom is ready, her eyes are glistening but she doesn't seem overly concerned. Relieved, maybe. We walk to the car in silence. Once the doors are shut she reaches over and pets my head. “You okay, Sylvie?” she asks. “I know you didn't want to do this.”

I shrug. “I never want to do any of it. I feel like a lab rat.”

“I know, sweetie.” She takes a breath. “Dr. Hong said to keep an eye on you —”

“It's good, Mom, okay? Can we just not talk about it?”

We both sit staring out the windshield at the concrete wall in front of us. Neither of us wants to go. But we don't want to stay, either.

Mom starts the car and leaves the parking garage. She takes the long way home. I notice as we get closer she starts swiping at her eyes. She never used to cry.

My own sadness strangles me enough that I know it's going to happen. I can feel it in the way my limbs go all tingly.

No. Not now. I slouch down as far as I can in the seat, hoping it's over quick so that Mom won't notice what's happening. If she sees, she'll freak.

My entire body hums and buzzes with electricity. There's an insane ache in my head. It's like I'm being shoved out of a tiny hole in my skull.

Then suddenly, I'm above us both, against the roof of the car. I watch as my body stays still a moment, then crumples in upon itself, my head dropping forward.

Luckily, we turn onto our road and Mom is too engrossed in what's going on ahead of us to even glance at me. My Dad is hauling boxes into his Volvo. And Sam, being Sam, is looking miserable, but helping. There's a pile of Green Bay Packer paraphernalia in the driveway, along with Dad's beat-up desk chair.

I hover near our heads, but I don't stay there for more than a few seconds because Mom slams on the brakes so hard my body is jolted forward and I'm yanked right back into it. There's a crack of pain all down my spine and bile rises into my mouth. I swallow it and spread my fingers out on my thighs to make sure I'm solid.

“Last stop,” says Mom, her voice hesitant.

Dad's just shoving his pillow into the trunk of the Volvo.

Home sweet home.

Two

August: The Girl on the Other Side of the Hedge

It's midnight and I can't sleep. I'm at the desk in my room, drowning watercolors, watching them saturate the paper and seep into one another. Sometimes one color dominates, sometimes they stay separate, a jagged line providing the barrier between the shades. But mostly the different colors blend to create something changed. Unrecognizable. Burnt Umber becomes sludgy brown, Rose Lake morphs into pinky gray, and Sepia changes to greenish black. I wet my brush and let water pool in the middle of the page. The textured paper buckles and bubbles as if tortured.

I try not to think about my dad's leaving. I try not to think about how tonight he's sleeping in some apartment he's rented, because he's decided he prefers that over living with us. I try not to think about how if I were normal, he may never have left. I try not to think about it, but I do.

The pain of it is sharp and thorny. I want to hold back tears, but one escapes and falls onto my paper. It bleeds into the mess of paint. I push the palms of my hands against my eye-sockets, concentrating hard on forgetting.

A low and steady sputtering from outside my window breaks my concentration. I look out to see a guy on a motorcycle pull up next door and Cassie hop off the back of it. Her date. She doesn't kiss him — she barely even waves — just heads straight up her front steps and into her house. He guns the motor and skids a bit, then disappears down the street.

Thirty seconds later my cell phone beeps. The text is from Cassie: "*Outside.*"

I pull my sweatshirt off the back of my chair and quietly open the door to my room. The house is dark. Mom rarely stays up later than eleven, so I'm not too worried. I tiptoe down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door.

As I cross the cool concrete patio and step onto the lawn with bare feet, I hear the squeak of Cassie's screen door. The moon is a tiny slit, and in the darkness I can't make out Cassie's features right away, but I see a flash of pale and know she smiled at me.

We both move towards the hedge that separates our yards. The hedge where we met eleven years ago.

I can still remember Cassie then. Her hair was shiny, almost sparkling, and my five-year-old self thought it looked somewhere between my Crayola colors of Copper and Fuzzy Wuzzy Brown. In it were perched two silver butterfly barrettes, catching the bright winter sun. There was a lot of activity going on behind her, people carrying boxes and, every once in a while, two or three men puffing under some large piece of furniture. My dad was one of them.

The second he'd seen the moving van pull up next door earlier that morning, he'd shrugged on his coat and said, "I'll see if they need help."

"I'll make them some soup, you know, to welcome them to the neighborhood." My mom was already taking out a large pot.

"I don't- " Dad started, but Mom shut him up with a look. I didn't know it then, but Mom doesn't cook like other people. We don't eat like other people. Words like *scorched*, *congealed* and euphemisms for *gross* are a daily part of our vocabulary. *Delicious* isn't. I only found out from Cassie a couple of years ago that she and her parents had taken one taste of my mom's soup then poured it into the toilet.

Mom moved in front of the table with a handful of vegetables and glanced out the window. "That girl should have a hat on. It's January, for God's sake." But before I could see who she was talking about, she said, "Outside, you two," and stuffed my brother Sam and me into our snowsuits, yanking

woolen hats hard onto our heads.

That's when I saw her. She wore a heavy sweater and a scarf, but no coat.

My Moon Boots punched holes into the snow as I made my way to the hedge. The girl's green eyes followed my progress, her skin pale under a dark smattering of freckles. "Hi," she said when I was standing across from her.

I wanted to be her. I knew it deep in my gut and tight in my heart. I wanted nothing more than to see her eyes and freckles in the mirror. To have that mane of hair free to catch snowflakes blown in the winter breeze.

A snowball whapped me smack in the back. I pointed over my shoulder and behind me, rolling my eyes: "That's my brother."

Cassie's gaze slid over to Sam, then back to me. "Can I play?"

The three of us built a lopsided snowman with pinecones for eyes. Of course, Sam decapitated it the second we were finished. When he went in for hot chocolate, Cassie and I stayed outside to make snow angels.

We didn't want to mess up the angels with our footprints, so we stayed lying on the ground. The minutes passed as we lazed there, sinking into the snow, staring at a wisp of a cloud in the cerulean sky. As the cloud disintegrated into nothing, my entire body prickled and there was a huge squeeze from my feet up to the top of my head, like all of me was suffocating.

Suddenly, I was floating outside myself, above myself, for the first time ever. Everything showed up brighter and in more minute detail than normal, from the poppy red Cardinal clinging to the bristly top branches of our tall pine tree, to the snappy twitching of a squirrel's tail as he ran across the telephone wire, to the diamond surface of the snow in the yards all down the block. And I could see two girls below – me, bundled up and stiff in my pink snowsuit, hat pulled tight over my head and Cassie, loose as laughter in her fuzzy wool sweater and scarf. Her long hair was spread out around her, a shock of color against the white snow.

I wasn't scared to be out of my body. Maybe because I was too young to grasp what was going on. Or maybe because it was so peaceful that first time – after all, it's only recently the shadows have shown up.

Regardless, I didn't freak out.

I came back to my body, not with the jolt I usually feel now, but I slid back in, almost imperceptibly. A strand of Cassie's hair tickled my cheek.

She turned to me then, her smile radiant. "Hey," she said. "Wanna be friends?"

Now eleven years later, our friendship is ... well, perfect. Except that nothing's perfect. You just have to look a little closer and a little longer to find that out. Even supermodels are photo-shopped.

I lean against the hedge and can now see Cassie clearly, despite the darkness. A pinprick of envy pierces my chest; Cassie has really gotten gorgeous. Even with her hair in a messy ponytail, even in a T-shirt and well-worn jeans, beauty clings to her like fairy dust.

What I wouldn't give for a pinch of that dust.

I give her an exaggerated smile and say, "So. Your place or mine?"

She laughs and motions for me to go there. I move close to the house where there is a tiny break in the hedge and squeeze through, passing fluorescent patio furniture and an industrial-sized grill. Cassie is already lying on her back in the grass. I lie down in the opposite direction, the top of my head almost touching hers.

How many times have we done this – met in the middle of the night, in her or my backyard, looked at the stars and talked? I don't remember how young we were when it started – when we met at night instead of day — because like most everything with Cassie, it's always just been that way. I do

remember how old I was when my mom freaked out about it, though: thirteen. Cassie and I had fallen asleep out in my backyard, and in the morning when my mom saw us there she completely lost it (for a yoga nut she can get pretty wound up). She started screeching at us never to go out alone at night (even in our own backyards) because who knew what kind of murderers or kidnappers or rapists lurked waiting to get their hands on us. Who knew what would happen to me if I were out of her sight. Of course, Cassie's parents thought the whole thing was hilarious. They would let Cassie sleep on the lawn every night if she wanted to. So now Cassie comes out with no worries, while I always have to sneak around as if I'm doing something criminal like selling drugs.

The grass is cool but dry. I bend my legs, knees in the air, and grip the lawn with my toes.

"Tonight was the worst, Sylvie. I swear that Ted is deranged." Cassie lifts a long leg up into the air as she talks. From where I am it looks like her toes are pointing to the Big Dipper. "Get this: he bought two big servings of pasta from Infusino's — not to eat — but to show me how they splattered all over the place when he ran over the boxes with his Harley!"

I laugh and lift my own legs into the air. But next to hers, they look like short twigs.

Cassie sighs. "I can't believe I spent the last night before school starts with him. I should've spent it with you."

"Yeah, well. I was pulverizing pasta tonight, too," I joke. "Messy, but fun."

Cassie giggles, but she knows what I did tonight. Same as I usually do while she's out with boys: absolutely nothing. We stay quiet a minute, listening to the crickets and gathering our thoughts.

I take a breath, hold it, then let it out long and slow. "My dad moved out today," I whisper.

I feel a whoosh of air behind me as Cassie sits up and looks down at me. "I don't believe it."

"It's true."

"While you were at the sleep lab?"

I nod.

"He really did it. I thought he was bluffing. But he really did it." Cassie bites her lip and puts her hand on my arm. "Oh, no. I'm sorry, Sylvie."

The pain I'm feeling must be the same pain the lady in the box would feel if the magician ever actually sawed her in half. I sit up. Cassie's hand falls from my arm, but she stays closer to me than usual. "Yeah," I say. "Well, you're not as sorry as I am. With Dad gone, Mom's taking Dr. Hong's orders to feed me healthy food a little too seriously. We had millet pilaf for supper. With a beet Bundt cake for dessert."

"Beets for dessert?"

"According to Mom, they're sweet." I pause. "Actually, the Bundt cake was almost edible. It was the pilaf that didn't turn out. Not for lack of trying, though."

"She does love cooking," Cassie says, cringing.

"Yeah. Too bad none of us have the heart to tell her how badly she sucks at it." The thought of my Mom standing in front of the stove stirring something black and sticky brings a smile to my face. She thinks she's a food alchemist. That she can carbonize dinner and still somehow turn it into something delectable. It never works, but she never gives up. It's one thing I love about her.

I guess it's one thing Dad doesn't love anymore.

My smile fades.

Cassie gives me a hug. She smells like chocolate and Aviance Night Musk. I want to cling to her and cry, but instead I give her a squeeze and pull away. "Ugh. Let's talk about something other than family."

"Okay," Cassie says. She smirks at me, raising one eyebrow (she can do that, raise one eyebrow at a time). "Gonna ask Kevin out this year?"

Kevin Phillips is a god. He is the sun and the rest of us are planets circling around him. He is the

hottest, most popular guy in school: the pitcher on our high school baseball team and one of the best on the swim team. But I fell in love with him before his popularity – way back in fifth grade when he still had braces and thick Coke bottle glasses that got knocked off every time he played a sport.

Now that Kevin's got straight teeth and contacts, he only looks at girls like Ashley Green or Kayla Conroy. Pretty, snotty, and easy.

“Shut up, Cass. You know I'm not going to ask him out. He's been with what's-her-name since March, anyways. They're gonna have their lips grafted together soon.”

“So what?”

I cross my arms and study her. Cassie and I have always hung together, two loners against the world. Me, the medical misfit. Her, the caretaking kind that's never left my side. Of the two of us, she's the cute one. Even in first grade, people would comment on her thick hair, the sprinkle of freckles on her nose. However, by age ten, Cassie's cuteness got eclipsed by her gawky limbs. We were a perfect pair then – me, the short, skinny one, her, the tall, gangly one. “Late bloomers,” my mom always said about both of us – although all I have to do is look at my mom and see that I'll never “bloom” into something curvy. But just this summer Cassie did. She turned beautiful, really beautiful. Like some exotic creature, not my best friend. And here I am — barely skirting average on a really good day — right next to her like a nasty zit on a perfectly made-up face. There's no way a zit like me is asking Kevin out.

“Just forget it, okay?”

Cassie finds a dandelion and picks it. Then she takes a breath and says, “Don't get me wrong, Sylvie. But don't you ever want to maybe ... look at other guys, too? He's not the only one out there, you know.”

Fear trickles through me. “You like him, don't you.”

“No, that's not it.” She shakes her head. “I just think that either you talk to him or you ... branch out. That's all.”

Thing is, there's no “branching out” for me. Because maybe Cassie doesn't remember, but I can't forget how in fifth grade I would go to school nauseous with fear, knowing that Randy Lang would get me at some point during the day. How he'd call me *skinny* and *creepy* and, how no matter how hard I gripped my lunch money in my sweaty hand, he'd manage to pry my fingers back while grinding my spine into the rough tan bricks of the school wall. How I'd always end up a quivering mass of jelly on the ground. How Randy made me feel so small and worthless and scared, I never told on him. And how Kevin stopped it. Kevin, in his crooked glasses and bright orange braces, should have looked ridiculous standing up to Randy to defend the class weirdo. But instead he looked like a hero.

“Leave her alone, you stupid ape,” he said one day.

“Yeah, whaddya gonna do 'bout it metal mouth?” Randy growled and pushed Kevin into the same brick wall.

And then Kevin did it. He bit Randy. Not a clean bite. A nasty one, one that left ripped skin stuck in the wires on his teeth. One that got Randy screaming like a baby. One that got Kevin a month of sitting in the principal's office after school. And one that saved me from any more torture all the way through to the end of eighth grade.

Even now I can't think of Kevin and that day without tears clawing their way out. I swallow and say to Cassie, “No other boys. No one but Kevin. I'm just not ready to talk to him yet.” *Yeah. Not until I suddenly grow a new face.*

“You know you're obsessed, right? “

“Cass, you don't understand. You've never been saved by someone.”

She looks at me. “Yes, I have. You've saved me lots of times, Sylvie.”

“I've never *saved* you.”

“In a way. My parents ... I’m just glad you’ve been around. You’re there when I need you. Kevin may not know it, but I know you’re the best ever.”

“Oh, don’t start *that* B.S. It’s —”

But Cassie reaches over and pokes me in the side, my most ticklish spot.

“Hey!” I laugh and slap her lightly on the forehead. We poke and smack each other, giggling until I see the light go on upstairs in my mom’s bedroom window.

“Crap! It’s my mom. Gotta head.” I stand up, brush the grass off myself and race toward my house.

“See you tomorrow,” Cassie says in a loud whisper.

I slip into the kitchen silently and open the refrigerator, yanking out the cranberry juice. I turn on the stove light to see better and get a glass. Just as I’m filling it, Mom appears in the doorway.

“Ah!” She jumps and puts her hand to her chest. “What are you doing here? You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Thirsty.”

“Can’t sleep either?”

I shrug and sigh, relieved she didn’t get up because of me and Cassie. Coming down for a midnight snack is acceptable in her eyes. Going into the yard isn’t.

She sits down at the table across from me. She looks like she’s been electrocuted, her hair is such a mess. And her eyes are all puffy, like she’s been crying.

I hesitate. We haven’t said much to each other today and I’m afraid a question might open up a dam. But I ask anyways. “Why are you up?”

“Oh, too much on my mind. With your father gone, I keep rehashing our lives, wondering what I could have done differently. What *we* could have done differently. Just looking at the bathroom sink, where his toothbrush should be—” She stops abruptly. “Oh, Lord. You don’t want to hear this, Sylvie.”

She’s right. I don’t want to hear this. It makes me too sad. I try to smile at her but it comes out lopsided. I get up and pour my juice in the sink. “Well, I think I’d better get some sleep.”

She nods and gives me a pat on the arm. I hurry up the stairs, but before I reach the top, I hear her sob. In my room, I close the door, shutting out the noise, wishing I could shut out so much more.

Three

August: Shadow Plays

I toss and turn in bed. The pain and anger of seeing my dad pack up his car and leave hasn't gone away. In fact, it crushes me so hard, I'm squeezed out of my body. Literally. I try to clutch my bedcovers, to stop it from happening, but I have no control.

Oh, come on. Give me a freakin' break. Like I don't have enough going on?

I'm out in a matter of seconds. I feel solid, but insubstantial. Like Cool Whip.

I hear them before I see them: the shadows. An icy tongue of fear stabs through me. The noise is a high-pitched hissing. I know it's a language, even if I can't make out the words.

Dark inky pools enter the periphery of my vision. Long, liquid fingers curling around the room. Then around me. Their touch is frigid and insidious.

Don't panic. They can't hurt you.

I know what to do. I have to ignore them and concentrate on being heavy. On getting back into my body. On leaving them behind.

I'm an anchor. I'm a two-ton weight.

I'm made of molten metal.

Wham! Back in my body, my breath leaves me in one loud whoosh. I feel as flattened as a Capri Sun sucked dry.

It takes all my energy to sit up. I search blindly for the switch on my lamp and try to scrape the bad taste off my tongue with my teeth. *Ugh. I hate it when that happens.*

The shadows don't come every time. Thank God. If they did I'd go crazy (if I'm not already). The shadows are like leeches. I don't know what they drain me of, but I feel half-empty after they've come.

And then there's the aftertaste. Sharp and metallic. It coats my mouth for hours.

The only solution to keeping the shadows away forever is to think happy thoughts. Which is pretty hard to manage all the time.

But I try it anyways. So I go to sleep thinking: *Happy, happy, joy, joy ...*

October 28th

Get out.

I stumble to the door, fumble with the lock and pull it open. The hallway is dark and silent. Sleep blankets the whole house.

Feeling the textured wallpaper in the hall, I let my touch lead me to the top of the stairs. I hover, unsure how to go down with such big feet. I cling to the railing and move down each step foot-together-foot-together like a toddler learning to walk. Sweat drips down the sides of my face, this face, when I think for a second about what's really happening. So I don't think about it. I can't.

Finally, I make it down the stairs and to the front door. I heave it open. The October air is so cold it's prickly. My new legs are awkward, but their stride is long. It only takes a moment of right, left, right, left before I'm sprinting down the street in full force. I take the shortcut through the park and stop at the back of it. The grade school gate is closed. And locked.

I should have known.

Tears sting my eyes and the back of my throat. The fence is too high. I'm too small. I've never been able to climb that thing. Going around will take forever. Too long. And I don't have enough time. Because I've got to get home before ...

I've just got to get home.

I look down at this body. Then back at the fence. And when I reach up towards the smooth planks of wood, I realize I'm tall enough that my fingers are able to grasp the top.

I wrap both hands around the edge and hold on tight. My feet slide and push against the fence, and my shoulders, his shoulders, strain against the weight, but they don't even hurt. And then I'm up and over. Just like that.

Get home.

I run until my lungs are burning raw and I still run some more. When I make it to my street, red lights are flashing in front of my house. Oh God. An ambulance is leaving, its siren loud and urgent.

"No!" I scream. But it speeds on.