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## View From A Hill

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# VIEW FROM A HILL

JENNIFER CURTIN



My mother and I drive up Parnassus Avenue in the hills of San Francisco. Listening to our iPod, I sing along to “Gold Dust Woman” by Fleetwood Mac. Usually, my mother would join me, especially since this song is one of our favorites, but she seems ashamed of her weakening voice. The pulsating rhythm of the song enhances the nervous tension as we charge up the Victorian-lined

incline. We finally approach the busy campus of the University of California, San Francisco, which also happens to be the home of one of its Medical Centers and the oncology department.

Students, nurses, and doctors congregate outside of the towering buildings on either side of the street, holding clipboards and clutching book-bags. White lab coats drape over their arms as they incessantly talk to each other or eat out of Tupperware, but I ignore these people who rush in and out of the enormous off-white buildings. I search for the ones who look more like my mother—not necessarily missing their hair and covering their bare heads with flower patterned scarves, but ones who have skin a shade too light or clothes an extra size too big. I quickly glance around, but the broad daylight doesn’t reveal anyone’s motives or issues.

I am instantly anxious; I’ve never liked hospitals or having to go to them, particularly UCSF. Although this is a routine blood work check-up, I don’t want to be here. Hospitals reek of illness, weakness, death, and cancer. Despite the trees plotted along the San Francisco street, or the forested area that appears behind the Medical Center, and the overall antiseptic, cleanliness of the place, I don’t feel clean. I only feel safe because my mother is beside me, walking with quick, little steps, blinking her lash-free eyes, and directing me exactly where to go.

From the parking lot, we cross the car filled street, passing bespectacled physicians and others heading for the hospital. As we go through the huge glass doors, I hold the door open for an elderly couple inching through the entryway carting an oxygen tank. The foyer is filled with the people I have been dreading to see. An obese woman looks tired as she sits uncomfortably near a nurse’s station, a young Latina mother holds the hands of her two children, one of whom coughs constantly, while various other ailments and people are rampant throughout the area. I am not revolted by sick people, that has nothing to do with my qualms about hospitals, but seeing someone in pain or in such a vulnerable state affects me both physically and emotionally. My heart begins to ache, my muscles become tense, my eyes water when I

see people with serious health problems. A bald teenager exits through the automated doors with his mother who holds paperwork and pill cases, and I can't help but think of my sickly mother.

My throat tightens as I stand in the hospital elevator heading to the upper floors where uncertainty waits, and I can't imagine what that must feel like—not knowing what to expect from test results or doctor's visits. To be sick, the defenselessness of it all is so beyond my imagination that when the real thing is right next to me, it takes every ounce of my spirit not to cry and to make a joke just to hear my mother laugh. A janitor shares the elevator with us, and he glances hesitantly at us; he is probably guessing her condition and what relation I have to this woman who, despite her paleness, still has skin more olive than mine.

My mother and I finally reach the upper level of the hospital where the oncology department is located. To my surprise, it is relatively pleasant and lively; on this floor, nurses and patients bustle around hallways lighted by the large floor to ceiling windows facing the street. After confirming her appointment, my mother and I turn down another corridor and are immediately welcomed by nurses who recognize my mom and beam at her.

"There's my girl! How are you, Ana?" they ask her, and my mom smiles in the familiar, chipper way that enchants her greeter. This occurs a couple more times; it's as if she is entering her favorite family-owned restaurant. They say hello to me in a way that suggests I must be the daughter she has mentioned to them many a time before.

If not for my nervousness, I wouldn't have noticed the rooms occupied by various patients receiving new blood or waiting for a consultation. My mother instructs me to sit in a chair alongside the wall of windows so as not to coop me up in a stuffy, small room with her and a nurse. I approach a seat next to a man reading a book and an African-American couple who sit close to one another. The woman is wearing a deep purple headscarf, a purple shirt, and her purple belt is the only thing keeping her jeans from falling off of her tiny frame. I imagine she is in here for the very same reason my mother is. I try to imagine if she has children or a job she can no longer go to, but I am suddenly stricken by the view in front of me.

Looking out the window, I see a magnificent view of San Francisco. At the top of this hill, Golden Gate Park and other areas of the city not visible from street level show a scene only witnessed from the inside of the hospital. Heavily wooded areas encompass the de Young Museum in the middle of the park, boasting its striking, green vastness. Even bigger than Central Park in New York City, Golden Gate Park's many lakes and fields call out to the explorer in me, and I wonder why I haven't been to the park more often. The hugeness of it all almost distracts me from the azure dome and spires of Saint Ignatius Church, and far behind it, the buildings of downtown SF small and distant. My mother finally comes out of the room with her nurse, still smiling.

"Everything looks okay," she says, and thoughts of her in the future, with black curls on her head and rosiness back in her cheeks, run through my mind. We approach a desk to make an appointment for the following week, and soon it's time to go.

This hospital doesn't just hold one dark aspect of life, it holds all aspects of life; it holds my mom's life. I may not like being here on this hill, in this building, in these circumstances, but I know that this is where my mother can get better. I pray it won't be

for much longer, that her distant future will only be as beautiful as what I have been witnessing today.

I can't help but look out the window again. More of the city lies outside these panes of glass: tiny houses and apartments that zigzag across the city, football fields and baseball diamonds, and if the fog were to clear, than I could probably make out the Golden Gate Bridge. But for now I settle with the fact that there is more out there than my eyes can possibly capture, so I turn to my mom, smooth skinned, beauty marked, and lovely.