

Extraordinary Means

Chapter One

Irreversible coma. Elaina – my mother – will tell you, I’ve never been anything but trouble.

I can see my body, and it wouldn’t make the cover of *Vogue*: What you can see of my face (there’s the tube taped to my nose) is sunken. My cheekbones stick out like little doorknobs. My arms and legs are bent up to my torso like chicken wings. My hair is lank and oily; they’ve cut it short just to get it out of the way. Underneath my drooping eyelids, two milky irises peer out.

Behind and around the bed is equipment that looks like it belongs in an auto assembly plant. And in my throat there’s a wide blue plastic tube that leads to a large console with a clear plastic cylinder on top. Within the cylinder is a bellows that swells and then retracts with a faint whoosh-click. This is the respirator, without the miracle of which I would no longer be with them.

But where am I? Hovering above the bed? That’s my perspective but I have no sense of occupying space. It’s been about two months since the accident, judging from the bits of conversation I’ve picked up. At first I felt groggy, like I’d been kicked in the head with two weeks’ worth of jet lag, but gradually my memory and my ability to perceive returned. I fought that; it was as if someone were trying to wake me up too early and I were clinging to the cottonballs of sleep, willing the intruder to go away. Then, you know how it is, being awake didn’t seem so bad. I started to put things together. I’m not dead, unless someone’s wasting a lot of money on a heart monitor, but I’m not about to go anywhere for lunch, either.

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Now I hear it, mingling with but still separate from the other hospital sounds (whoosh of respirator; squeak of the gurneys; arcane, incessant ding and pings)—the clack. My mother’s heels on the waxed hospital floor. And I feel lighter, queasy, as if I were floating closer to the ceiling.

The clacking stops in front of the nurses’ station. With my new-and-improved hearing, I can follow her low-pitched, hoarse voice; now melodious, now teasing, now uncertain. She’s trying to get a compliment from Nurse Pinafore, the blonde, whose pug nose my mother praises to her face but whose close-set eyes she maligns behind her back.

Then my mother swirls in, her black crepe dress rustling (she’s in mourning for me already; and besides, black makes her look thinner), the double choker of pearls and the high collar emphasizing her jawline and high cheekbones. Her milk skin shows a few wrinkles but they’re hardly visible in dim light, and her thick auburn hair is swept up and lacquered in a Gibson girl that went out of style a hundred years ago—along with mothers like her who take to their beds three days a month with the curse!

She gasps as if she’s never seen me like this before. She slaps her hand across her breasts, the enormous breasts that she passed on to all her daughters; her egg-shaped eyes (blue-gray, the color of the Pacific before the rain) widen even larger as she digs the tips of her sculptured nails into her cheekbones and drags them slowly down the side of her face, leaving marks like red snails’ tracks. “I can’t bear it!” she shrieks.

“My precious child!”

Give me a break!

She's here every afternoon. Mostly she sits by my bed, sometimes reading from the prayer book that belonged to her father, but occasionally wandering out into the hall for an interval of cheerful conversation. She knows the names of all the patients on the floor; she is the queen bee of 6-West, buzzing from room to room delivering messages and M&Ms. She swells with the illnesses of others; her concern proliferates like the blossoms of a bridal bouquet.

"Mickey Mouse would like some coffee," Daniel tells Becky and Leah, when all three are there with Elaina. Daniel is my brother, twenty-two, two years younger than I. It's my fault that we never got along. An early example: When he was in kindergarten I told the other kids that he had a second penis growing out of his behind, just like our cat Choppo's short tail. Daniel never had the wit to fight me verbally and they wouldn't let him hit me—besides, I was bigger than he was until we were teenagers.

"Guy," Beck laughs, drawing out the expletive, are you suddenly a double amputee?"

"I'll get it." Leah stands. She is the youngest, the blonde teddy bear of the family: fifteen, her worried, babyish face splattered with freckles.

"I wish your father were here," Elaina sniffs, dabbing at her eyes under her mascara.

"Guy, Mouse," Becky says, blowing a bubble of sugarless grape gum while she examines the moussed quills of her chestnut hair in a pocket mirror, "you make it sound like he's dead."

"With his personality, it's hard to tell sometimes. You know I'm just kidding."

But dad did come to visit yesterday. He usually comes about once a week, and then he stands in the corner, far away from the tubes and screens and consoles, tugging at his collar and clearing his throat and generally looking as though wants to throw up. This time, though, it had only been four days since his last visit. I don't think my family knows what it is, but I'm sure something big is about to happen.

My intuition approaches telepathy these days. Without a body, I'm not limited to the information my senses can gather; I'm aware of nuances that were too subtle for me before. Their thoughts are part of the atmosphere, like particles of light or radio waves; I feel as though I could reach out and pluck those thoughts out of the air like ripe plums, greedy and hungry girl that I am.

Meanwhile, no more headaches, menstrual cramps, constipation, eyestrain, indigestion, insomnia, sinusitis. I'm a newly popped kernel of popcorn, floating on a warm current of air.

"I'll be right back," Leah says.

"Lots of cream, please," Elaina tells her.

"Beam me down a Snickers," Becky says, removing her gum from her mouth and wrapping it in a shred of binder paper.

"Nothing for me, thanks," Daniel says.

Becky and Leah both go to Alta Vista High. I'm still remembered there, by some of the teachers that have been there forever. A couple of them even taught—or tried to teach—Elaina. They always remember the troubled ones. Aren't the troubled ones, the dark ones sulking outside the circle, more memorable in the end than the light and cheerful ones dancing along its edge? Try to distinguish among the angelic voices in a children's choir: The one you will hear is the one singing off-key.

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It's about eight o'clock in the evening. I feel lulled by the warm antiseptic air, the rhythmic whoosh-click of the respirator, and the purr from within its depths. In the distance I hear urgent, muffled voices.

Usually about now I sort of drowse a little. I have the feeling that as time goes by I won't do that so much; it's as if I haven't forgotten what it's like to be in a body, the way an infant thinks he's still part of his mother. This is the state that Dr. Gorgeous, the resident assigned to my case, had probably not read about in any medical books.

My EEG is not flat, but I'm without cognitive functions—I've heard the doctors explain that to my parents thirty times at last count. The thinking part of my brain is gone, they say. True—that body below me feels nothing. But I'll give them cognitive functions! I never liked doctors, anyway.

I can't rest tonight. I want to see what my family is doing. They must be talking about me; I must be, at last, the center of their attentions, as the gravity of my illness pulls their thoughts toward me. I need to know. I need to be with them. Maybe I'm not stuck here.

Maybe if I really try...

I picture them all in the large, sunken living room of our house, where a wobbly-looking chandelier throws patches of dim light across the beamed ceiling. The room reminds me of a dusty old cathedral, except that it's kept carefully dusted by Lee Emma. Paddy O'Flanagan, our current cat, is sleeping on the piano that no one knows how to play. I can even see the vertical slits in the fabric of the couch, and the pieces of exposed stuffing, where Paddy has sharpened his claws.

My father is in the wing chair, one shoe propped up on the opposite knee. Daddy: a.k.a. Jonathan Silverstein, President of Silverstein, Inc. At the hospital, the ambulatory patients ask him for investment advice in the hall. But having a daughter in a coma hasn't kept him home from the office much; in fact, I've heard my mother complains that he spends more time there than before. He wishes there were more than twenty-four hours in a day and that the excess fell between nine and five.

Becky is at his feet, her knees pressed up to her chin. Since this afternoon, she has "made up," which includes three black lines like cat's whiskers extending from each eye.

Leah perches on the arms of the chair. She wears a fuzzy blue sweater and her wispy hair is pulled back into a short ponytail, emphasizing the roundness of her face.

It's so detailed. So real. I feel as though it's happening now, as though by an act of imagination and will—both are much stronger in me now that my spirit isn't dividing its time between self-actualization and wondering where the ladies' room is—I managed to travel to our house on Magnolia Street, materialized there. ... A pleasant enough trip, no speed bumps or tacky billboards on this road. ...

Elaina is standing in front of the fireplace. "This can't go on," she says. "Melissa wouldn't want to be kept alive this way."

Yes, I would. Sure I would.

Daniel, sitting on the couch, looks up at Elaina adoringly. He has brown eyes that resemble Jonathan's and tight dark blond curls. He dresses foppishly; the red silk handkerchief is an affectation typical of his crowd of friends, a bunch of rich, overgrown partiers. I sometimes wonder if he's gay. "You're right, Mouse," he says.

"What's this?" Jonathan rouses himself from an in-depth study of the hemline of his pants. He looks around as if aware for the first time that there are other people in the room.

Elaina takes a deep breath. Once she's gotten Jonathan's attention, she's not about to throw it away too quickly. So she sucks in her cheeks and rolls her big eyes, but doesn't say anything.

"Mom," Becky groans, on Jonathan's behalf.

“I just mean we have to make some decision,” Elaina says. “It’s been two months now.”

“I think I know what Mouse is talking about,” Daniel says.

“Oh?” Jonathan asks. The puzzlement in his voice is a sign of irritation.

“I think” –Elaina rolls her eyes again, breathing so hard that it sounds like she’s going to hyperventilate or have an orgasm—“that we should tell Dr. Harding to disconnect the respirator.”

Disconnect the respirator? But if they do that, what will happen to me?

And now I know that I am here. Up until now, all this has been something I could have imagined. But I recognize this moment: the one you never quite reach in dreams, that wakes you just as it begins; the moment when control slips away and the possibility occurs to you that the universe is run by sinister forces. I can feel the texture of external reality, and how I am woven into the nap. I’m really here.

And my family is talking about murdering me. ...