

FIRST PERSON //

What Lies Beneath

■ BY KYLAH GOODFELLOW KLINGE

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Four weeks after she'd kissed me goodbye outside my freshman dorm, my mother swept into my hospital room with wool socks, a blank notebook for clear answers to worried queries, and an age-old anxiety: "Do you need fresh underwear?" she asked.

My roommate had been the first to notice: I couldn't smile with the right side of my mouth. I couldn't blink with my right eye. I couldn't laugh with both sides of my face.

"There is a small chance it could be a brain tumor, especially given that your father passed away because of one," the emergency room physician had said. "But you'll be just fine." Her wide eyes belied her assurances.

And so here we were, Mom and I, helpless child and dotting parent reverted. She didn't wait for my response about my underthings: Out the door and back again, she sculled a gift shop bag across my blanketed legs. "They'll be a bit large," she said. "But they should do."

The package featured a woman in a failed come-hither pose from an undefined but surely long past era, and a red sticker that blared XL.

"Are you sure these weren't brought up from the Victorian archives?" I asked, laughing alone, my mother silent with worry. Made of white inflexible material, they blanketed my abdomen, ending in a wide, wavering band at the top of my ribs.

It didn't matter, I decided, rolling them down to somewhere that approximated normal. I was being cared for by neurologists, who poked and tested areas not covered by my gown—legs, arms, eyes—residents and medical students in the back, straining to see my lopsided smile. No one would see what lay underneath.

"Do you feel a bit like a circus freak?" joked the resident in charge of my care. I nodded silently. "I'm sorry," he said. "Most of us have only read about Bell's palsy in textbooks."

He was 28—and from my

narrow vantage point of 18, ancient but cute. When he asked me to count backwards by threes, I stumbled, my heart speeding from more than mathematical stress. "Seems Georgetown isn't as prestigious as they claim," he teased.

His levity contrasted with the updates that kept coming. We're not sure what this is. We're going to do another test.

On the sixth day, he knocked softly on my door. He told me that none of the tests had found anything, that I would need a spinal tap, that he would be performing the procedure if I consented, that it would be his first attempt. "You can trust me," he said, uncharacteristically grave.

My mother was in the cafeteria; this decision would be my own. I nodded my permission. I was instructed to lie down, to tuck in my knees like a child, to remain still as a corpse. He held the needle next to my spinal column, three attending physicians appearing from nowhere to hang over his shoulder. "Keep your hand steady," they instructed him, their own hands outstretched, as if they could retroactively correct any misstep.

I was frightened by the puncture's threat. But I was also distracted by my underthings, bundled in a thick band at the base of my spine. What would he think?

"All done," he said before I had extracted myself from that embarrassed thought. The attendings departed. I exhaled, relieved for my life and that I could readjust my clothes. But as I reached my arms behind me, he stopped them. "Don't move," he said. "The cerebral spinal fluid shift will give you the worst headache of your life." And then, to my horror: "I'll fix it for you."

I bit my lip as he unfurled the underwear—roll by increasingly hesitant roll. When he reached my upper ribs, he slackened, then paused. "I'll just stop there," he said, with a single pat on my shoulder. I did not lift my eyes when he left.

When my mother returned, I told her what she'd missed. She laughed. And then we both laughed until we were no longer child and parent, but adult and adult, friend and friend.

Within a day, the answer arrived: the zoster virus. With steroids, my mouth and eye returned to movement. And with the passing of months and years, I hear it more and more: my mother's defiant laugh mixed with mine. It is, from paralysis, from the embarrassments and riddles and tragedies of our disobedient bodies, from youth and age, our only certain release. ■



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