

Coming To

Maren Schettler

I don't get out much. I mean, I don't move—can't move—unless someone moves me.

That's okay. I have no need to do anything but lie back and let the doctors take care of the rest. The grey walls and ceiling would ordinarily, I suppose, feel clinical and prison-like, but they're a comfort to my eyes. Nothing flashy. I can rest my eyes and open them without a shock of color. My eyes are the only part of me I can move, and they sure get their steps in, following the nurses as they make small adjustments to the machines, to my bandages, to my limbs. I close my eyes. Not moving is a lot of work.

I discover new injuries everyday. It's a bit fun, actually. It's as if the staples and stitches and aches and pains are playing a game of hide and seek on and beneath my skin. This morning the hospital robe slid open on my left side as a nurse leaned to shift the pillows behind my head, and I found a centipede of staples tightly holding a laceration together along my hip. Hadn't felt 'em there. I suppose credit goes to the nurse for revealing their hiding place.

I didn't find the spinal fracture. The spinal fracture found me. I couldn't figure out why I was so uncomfortable—from what I remembered, it was just my head and pelvis that had taken the real hits. But the pillows were never quite in the right place. Sometime during the blur

of days in the ICU, I asked my mom to list my injuries. (I promptly forgot each one; the game of hide and seek continued long after as I painfully rediscovered every fracture, every day.) She listed, and I focused in as well as I could—spinal process fracture. That was a new one. At least the pain makes sense now.

I am in intermediate care. The room is smaller, but the walls and ceilings are still grey. Grey is my favorite neutral color, I think. It's soft and smooth, sharp and translucent. It clears and numbs my mind. When I get nauseous from trying to sit upright, or dizzy as the nurses roll me onto either side to buoy my limbs with pillows, the grey is there. My mom's eyes are grey too. I bet they have a tougher job than mine, despite the marathons mine lazily jog, tracking the nurses' activity and scanning my body up and down for missing injuries. But hers—hers are a mother's eyes, and I bet their grey has seen all my sharp edges and smoothed them over with vision blurred by tears.

Two PTs came in today. Said I can move from the bed now, with their help; and the bed's, and the grey's. Keep me steady, keep me safe. I did very little. The head of the bed whirred, inclining, and beeped when it regrettably stopped short of shrugging me upright. The PTs used the sheets beneath me to rotate my body and lower my legs off the edge of the bed. My mom caught my gaze; she offered an encouraging nod, and we shared a deep breath. She's a nurse, and I could tell she didn't like being on the other side of healthcare. Too much is left in the hands of those who care too little. The older PT spoke reassuringly, and she balled up and gripped the sheets as she slid me slowly from bed to wheelchair. With more mental effort than physical, I sat up, willing my back to support me. But my will was not enough, and I slouched into my elbows on the armrests. They were uncomfortably wide, and being tired already, I looked ahead at the grey and inhaled it, letting it balm my mind and wrap me up to keep me from collapsing.

My mom suggests wheeling me out of the room and into the hallway "for a change of scenery" and the grey ribbons around me wilt and fall to the tile floor. Out of the room? No, thank you. I have everything I need in here. My pulse quickens, but only so much as my body can handle. My heart beats down my will, and before I can process what's happening or put up a fight, my mom is behind my chair, pushing me towards the door.

The lights are brighter in the hallway, and with eyebrows scrunched

and eyes squinting, I'm paraded past nurses, doctors, and open doors to patients' rooms. The hall walls are grey too, but the fluorescent lights force my eyes into a squint, and air rushes by me all too fast. Unbidden pains find me and need no convincing to prod; to anyone else, the floor is smooth and well-worn, but I dread every crack in the tiles which give my fractures another reason to perform acupuncture underneath my skin. My mind wars, wondering how to distract myself without becoming exhausted. To look at the walls means watching the blurry, grey world spin around me and lose the only thing I can control—my vision. The picture frames on the walls, displaying generic photos of generic things, might be used as anchors, but they leave my field of vision before I can hold onto them. From them I glimpse blurs of green grass and wisps of clouds, an old couple laughing, a cup of coffee. The armrests go stiff beneath my hands which weakly grip the wheelchair. Its plastic and metal that scaffold my bones are real and solid. Clouds and laughter and coffee are foreign, faint feelings of a life trailing behind me. Nothing grounds me like pain, but pain leaves me wanting nothing more than to float out of the chair, weightless, and slip into the hospital bed, blanketed by unassuming grey.

It's a few seconds before I realize I've been wheeled back into my room, and I rest, sinking further into the hard leather of the armrests. The room's walls sigh in relief, as though worried that I might not have returned.

Don't worry, grey, I won't leave you yet.

I've been demoted to the med-surg unit. Had my legs been capable of kicking or my lungs of screaming, I would have fought to stay, dear grey. I stare hard at my walls and paint the exact shade on the back of my eyelids, shutting them while the nurse transports me through the hallways to the new room. I open them to a shrunken version of my previous room and quickly compare my memory's grey to these walls. This grey has faded. It feels transparent, thin, and weathered, like an old woman's skin. Grief shadows my face, and the transport nurse must notice my disappointment because she makes a comment about the downgrade of room being a sign of a well-paced recovery. Soon you'll be discharged to rehab, and then on your way home, she says. I nod.

My mom comes in, holding her purse, coat, hat, and, as always, a thermos of coffee. While you're in the wheelchair, she asks, do you want to take a look around the new unit? Why not, I respond. I have betrayed and

abandoned my beloved grey home, and this new room holds no comfort for me. I'm convinced I'll unravel the moment I pass through the door.

Instead, I look at the hallways I had shut my eyes to beforehand. My mind, having kept pace with my body's steady recovery, walks in step with my mom's gait. I notice things. Before, I had been capable only of absorbing the immediate stimuli. Now the pale walls don't spin as they had. An air-conditioned breeze flows past, and I'm reminded of what it used to feel like to run. I lock my gaze at a point on the wall, and as we pass, I brush my fingers against it and feel the tips vibrate until they numb. The paint is textured like our walls at home. Mesmerized, I almost don't see the framed picture approaching my hand as I'm guided along. Abruptly, I pull back and stare up at the image, and my mom pauses our stroll. A stock photograph, similar in style to the ones on the intermediate care floor, displays a landscape. At first there is only color: deep storm-grey and gold. The gold becomes blurs of swaying wheat lit up by the sun, which must be looking over the photographer's shoulder, out of frame. The rays contour heavy thunderheads that roll above the fields.

I stare as deep-purple bruises emerge through the storm clouds, and a thin scar scrapes across golden skin to form the horizon. My gaze travels every inch of the image, recalling the paths I've taken up and down my own body.

Should we make our way back, my mom asks, gently. She had moved from behind the wheelchair to kneel by my side, to see what I was seeing. I blink away tears I hadn't noticed as we turn back to my room. Before entering, I shut my eyes, desperate to keep the vibrance of the image from my corrupted short-term memory. I open again to the paled walls of my room, and long, finally, to return to normalcy.

Maren Schettler is a senior studying English, music, and political science. She loves the outdoors and enjoys camping and hiking with friends and family. While in school, there is no end to her frustration with the lack of leisure reading time. Her boxer dog Pacha is her favorite reading buddy.