

FROM

With or Without You

BY CAROLINE LEAVITT

Stella maps out time by noise, music, scent, and heat. The morning sun on her body, the coolness of night, sometimes the rough wash of a cloth over her body. Everything looks and feels different now. Sounds are sharper. She sees colors behind her lids, but when she tries to focus, tastes flood her mouth. Apples. Roast beef. Once, strawberry ice cream, just out of nowhere, like a kind of wonderful surprise. Her senses are all mixed up and she keeps thinking, More. Please, more, more, more. The surprise of it makes her feel more alive. It's something new, something positive, so surely it means things are changing. Someone touches her hand and she sees a flash of turquoise. Someone says something and she smells oranges, making her mouth water.

Stella shivers at a kiss on her hand. She knows it's Simon's, and though she can't see him right now, she feels like a light has been switched on. His lips seem to blend right into her skin, heat coursing through her body like a stream. "It's time for you to wake up, honey," she hears him say, but she doesn't really understand what he means, except for the word *honey*, but in his mouth, it sounds sad rather than loving, and that bothers her.

She hears people yelling at her, calling *Stella, Stella, Stella*, her name like the clang of a bell. She hears a banging noise so close to her face that she would flinch back if she could. She hears Simon, and sometimes Libby, too. Libby. Her friend Libby. She knows when Libby is there because she can smell her, like coconut, like a weird float of red and blue that has a scent all its own. She can feel her stirring the air.

She shimmers above herself. Her memories are hazy. They seem like a book she had read one too many times, but a book she had loved. Who was that Stella? What was on her next page?

"Simon," she hears, and she recognizes Libby's voice, and a flood of happiness washes over her. Libby, she tries to say. Libby, my friend!

“The drive,” Libby says. “That was nice.”

What drive? Stella thinks.

“I know a place that has the best pizza,” Simon says. There’s a funny silence and Stella rides it like a wave, coming down with a bounce. “I sometimes go there when I’m done with the hospital. You should eat, too. Something other than that awful hospital food.”

Stella listens in wonder. She remembers how much Libby had disapproved of Simon, how she didn’t think he was good enough for Stella. Do Simon and Libby like each other now? Stella hopes so because she loves them both, but still there’s a flare of jealousy zigzagging through her stomach. They can like each other, she tells herself. It’s all right.

“Stella,” she hears him say now. She tries to let him know, sending out thoughts that have sound attached, but he doesn’t say anything more to her, so she has to assume that he’s oblivious. He cries, but there’s nothing she can do about it, except think, meanly, Well, why didn’t you cry before? “Come back,” he says. “Please come back.”

I’m trying.

Simon never gives up hope. She knows this about him. He always thought he was going to go right to the top in music and stay there. He thought he would be the next Dylan, that his band would be the next Pearl Jam, that the songs he uploads on the band’s website would go viral. And at first it seemed possible. But then she saw how his audience was getting older, not younger, and that wasn’t a good sign, how the concert halls weren’t filling anymore, so the band had to play at fairgrounds, singing to drunks and kids who were only there to snag some weed. The band was background noise, a reason for another beer, another toke, but she didn’t say anything to Simon. She had always just hoped he would find his way, and fool that she was, she had hoped that his way might be her.

Light pours into her, warm as a shower, and she feels herself contract. “Oh, that’s good,” Libby says, and Stella wants to scream, I’m here, I’m here, don’t go away, I’m here.

The light gets brighter and she feels herself flinch again. “Come on, Stella,” Libby says, and Stella thinks, Oh, shut up. I’m doing the best I can. She read once about people who saw white lights when they died, but she never believed it. That was hokum, just the brain being starved of oxygen.

The body trying to keep itself from reaching the edge of panic. The light flashes again, and her mind rolls over it like water over a stone. Is she dying? Is this all there is for her? Peggy Lee sang that, she remembers. Simon played the song for her. She needs Peggy Lee singing.

Simon comes closer. His sorrow is rich and fragrant. “She doesn’t know I’m here,” he says.

Yes, Yes, I do.

She had had lots of men in her life when she was in college, guys who wanted to be doctors, psychologists, electricians, but she had never loved any one of them enough to settle down with. Then, degree in hand, her career under way, she met Simon.

“We don’t know that,” Libby says, and her voice has something new in it that Stella can’t place. “Stella, wake up! Stella, wake up!” Libby says.

I would if I could.

Coma, she hears someone say, and something twists in her stomach. She had seen coma patients right here in the hospital. There was a single mother, and Stella still remembers her name: Doris Harper. Young and blond and gorgeous, with a tiny diamond nose ring and a big smile. She came in all by herself to have her baby, and everything interested her, the labor pains that she said were like having a *T. rex* inside her, the monitor, even the surgical gown that she fastened in the back with two glittery diaper pins. But something happened on the table. Her heart stopped. She went into a coma for two weeks, and when she came out of it, she didn’t ask about her baby, a burly little boy she had wanted to name Jake. She didn’t want to see him. “Why should I?” she said. “I’ll be gone again. I made the wrong decision. I want to go back.”

The doctors monitored Doris. The nurses put Jake in her arms, and she rocked him, sang to him, and kissed his little cheek. Everyone thought everything was going to be fine. But then Doris had gone home, with her baby, and two weeks later, roiling in postpartum depression, she killed herself and her baby went to Social Services.

You never knew how things were going to turn out.

“Coma,” Stella hears again, and then Libby’s soothing voice. “She’ll come out of it, Simon. You told me she was a fighter.” When, Stella thinks. When had Simon told Libby that?

Well, this state is nothing like coma. Not that she's ever been in one before. Not that she would know. But this feels like nothing anyone who has come out of coma has told her. It's nothing like anything she has ever studied. She can feel Libby and Simon moving about the room, and then suddenly, she is moving, too. Like a spirit.

She swirls about the hospital and sees and hears things she didn't notice before. Is she hallucinating? she wonders. She rounds a corner, and if this is a hallucination, well, the details are all so right, so specific, right down to the hand lotion on the nurse's cart, the stack of diapers on the bottom. Is this all some sort of vast cosmic joke, and is she the punch line? In her room again, Stella sees Madonna in a black lace bustier smoking a cigarette and grinning at her before she flies away.

Stella knows that there are specialists who work to bring people out of comas. But, really, who knows what works? A child's puppy licking his face. A favorite perfume. A swish of velvet.

A kiss from someone you love.

In her bed again, Stella tries to think of what she knows about herself. She is here. She can sense things. Something is wrong. She loved Simon.

The past tense bothers her.

"Baby girl," she hears, and she thinks, Mom, Mom, Mom again. She wants to reach for her, to burrow her face against her mother's warm neck.

Something feels different. There's been a seismic shift. Or a time loop, the past and present all entwined. Animals know when an earthquake is about to happen. People, too, sense things, and she feels herself floating up again, as if she is moving into the future. She can't tell what's in the future, though. All she knows is this bed, the smells of the sheets, and the senses around her.

Now she hears something crashing against her ears, and then she's floating higher, up against this raging tide, and her ears hurt, and then her skin hurts, and then there is a blink of light before she falls back again, settled more deeply into the dark. She feels different now, new somehow. She wants to laugh out loud.

"Stella!" She hears her name and something sharp is poked under her nose. Cinnamon, she thinks. Or maybe table salt. She's rising up again. Something is trying to get out of her body, and for a moment, it hurts. Pain.

For a second, she feels as if her body is moving. Her hand. Just a twitch. That's what it is. When was the last time she felt pain?

There is that blink of light again, growing stronger, pressing against her eyes like a thumb, and she opens them, and everything is so bright she can't see for a minute. Her body, heavy and dense, falls back into the bed. "Glasses," she says, and it is strange to hear her voice, hoarse and hollow and filled with fluid, but she means sunglasses, not the glass of water someone is handing her because it is all so bright, so new, and then she blinks and her vision clears a little, and there, standing at the foot of her bed, beautiful and strange, his whole body shimmering, is Simon, before she's pulled back down, into the murk. "Simon," she tries to say. "Simon."

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