

It's my father who finally tells me the truth. I wake up in the middle of the night and for once, there's only one person in the room with me, instead of an army of doctors and interns and who knows who else. I recognize the sound of his breathing. I can hear the scratch of his pencil against paper so I know he's not asleep. He's probably doing a crossword puzzle.

“Daddy?” I say into the darkness.

“I'm here, sweetheart,” he answers. His chair squeaks against

the linoleum. He's pulling it to sit along my right side. He takes my hand in his. His palms are hot and clammy, like he's nervous about something. He stays sitting down instead of standing with his face above mine, so I can't see him.

For what feels like the millionth time, I ask, "When will these bandages come off? When will I be healed?" I've gotten much better at speaking with this mask on, but the words still come slowly.

Dad doesn't say anything for so long that I think he might have fallen asleep. But finally, he says, "Your face won't ever heal."

That doesn't make any sense. Everything heals eventually, right? If my face isn't going to heal, then what am I doing here, in the hospital? My seventh-grade science teacher taught us about *if, then* statements, and I always liked how undeniably logical they were. So I ask my father the most undeniably logical question:

"If I'm never going to heal, then I'm dying, right?" The words struggle to make their way around the lump in my throat.

"No, sweetheart. It's just these burns—"

"I know," I say, the words coming out stiffly from beneath my bandages. "I've heard it a dozen times already. They're so severe. More severe than the burns on my side. Do I need a skin graft, is that it?" We read about them in biology class my freshman year. In cases of third-degree burns, they take the undamaged skin from one part of your body and stretch it over the burned part.

My father squeezes my hand in his. "Your face is more than just burned. It's—" He pauses. Takes a deep breath. When he speaks, his voice is shaking. "Part of it is destroyed."

*Destroyed.* The word sounds out of place here, in a hospital. *Destroyed* is what happens to villages in the path of tsunamis. To buildings when bombs drop. To ships that sink to the bottom of the

sea. *Destroyed* isn't something that happens to a thing as small as a single person's face.

Dad continues, "Your nose, your left cheek, most of your chin. The tissue was killed in the fire."

*Destroyed. Killed.* It's like I've never heard the words before. I have no idea what he means. How can parts of a person's face die?

"The dead skin, the muscle, the bone—the doctors had to remove it." That must have been when they put me into the coma. They wouldn't have been able to manage the pain any other way. "Now your face is wrapped in a special kind of antiseptic gauze, a kind of temporary substitute—"

"Part of my face is *gone*?" I interrupt. How is that possible? What exactly is the gauze wrapped around?

My father doesn't say anything. His breathing is ragged. He's crying. I don't think I've ever seen my father cry. Of course, I'm still not seeing it. I'm just hearing it.

*Electrical fires burn hotter and faster than regular fires.* How strange to think that as the fire grew hotter, it turned blue. Blue is the color of the cold bay, the cool afternoon sky, the color of freezing lips and fingertips. I can't imagine a hot kind of blue.

I think it might be easier to make sense of what my father's saying if I could just remember what it was like to catch fire, but my mind is blank. Maybe I'd already lost consciousness by the time it happened. Or maybe that's something your brain does for you; induces a sort of selective amnesia so that you can't remember the most terrifying moment of your life. But I wish I could remember *something*. Because right now, nothing my father is saying sounds true. None of it sounds like something that happened to *me*.

"My face—my nose, my cheek, my chin—they just *melted* off in

the fire, is that what you're saying?" I close my eyes and try to imagine it, an enormous jagged C curving around the left side of my face. It looks like something from a movie, a fairy tale, a horror story.

"Yes," he says hoarsely. "Kind of." The chair squeaks against the linoleum again. He's standing up. "I'll get you a tissue."

"What for?"

"You're crying." I felt the lump in my throat, but I didn't feel tears, and I guess I didn't feel my nose running because I no longer have a nose to run.

Oh god. I no longer have a *nose*. The lump in my throat rises until I think it will choke me.

Now he does come into my line of sight, carefully pressing a tissue into my eyes. I didn't feel the tears sneaking beneath my bandages to stream down my face, and I don't feel the pressure of his touch now.

"Why don't I feel anything?"

"The tissue is dead, baby. You *can't* feel anything."

I guess that explains why my face hurts less than my side. But I still don't understand. How can I not have a nose, two cheeks, a chin? That's not possible. There must be *something* left. There can't just be a big black hole where my nose used to be, can there?

Pink light begins streaming through the windows. Outside, the sun must be rising up through the fog.

It's not a lot of light, but it's enough. There won't be much to see, not with my face covered up the way it is, but I need to look. I don't think I'll believe it until I see it for myself. Not because I think Dad is lying—but because I literally can't conceive of it, can't wrap my mind around it.

"I need to see it," I beg softly. "Please."

My father nods, then disappears. For a second, I think he's leaving to get a doctor, a nurse, to insist they increase my morphine drip so that I'll fall back to sleep. Maybe he hopes that when I wake up, I won't remember any of this, or that I'll think it was just a dream. It seems like something out of a dream. A nightmare, really. Because in the real world, there's no such thing as a girl without a face.

Much to my surprise, Dad comes back with a mirror in his hand, the kind they put in the bathroom to help you put makeup on. I wait for him to put the mirror above my face so that I can see my reflection.

My head is wrapped in bandages, but I can see that where my nose should be protruding, it's flat as a pancake. My face kind of collapses just below my bottom lip—the gauze sinks inward where my chin used to be, like someone took an ax and sliced the bone right off, leaving nothing but empty space between my mouth and my neck.

The string of panic around my rib cage is tight, tighter than it's ever been before. I've never seen anything so ugly. I'm a freak, an alien, an extra from a sci-fi movie. I'm a monster who makes children cry, the cautionary tale parents tell.

A choked sort of gasp sticks in my throat as my eyes—the only features I can still recognize—fill with tears. What happens to a girl after she's been destroyed? Does she stay in the hospital forever, like an ogre from a folktale, locked away in a tower? Does she go back to school and get pointed at, gawked at, gossiped about? Does her boyfriend . . . oh my god, my boyfriend. Chirag can't see me like this. Chirag can't see me ever again. I can't believe I actually found it comforting to imagine he was sitting in a chair beside my bed, holding my hand all this time. Does Chirag even *know* about this?

What have my parents told him? I wish I'd never made Mom promise to call him. My heart is pounding so hard and so loud that I want to cover my ears.

Before my dad leaves, I ask him to put the mirror on the right side of my bed. I want it to be within arm's reach so that I can grab it anytime I need to remind myself that I was wrong:

There is such a thing as a girl without a face.