

Neglected

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She finally got up. She faces me without any recognition.

My eyes welled up with tears -- look at her! She can stand on her own without having to hold on to the edges of the sink for dear life. Her hair clings to her scalp in sweaty patches, and it's flattened in from laying on her side for so long. The same shirt from last week hangs off her frame, her sweatpants are a second skin. If I could only reach her, I would tell her everything she's ever wanted to hear. "Yes, yes you are magnificent and finally able to move."

But she will never hear me. The glass will forever separate us.

She stood before the sink and stared at her toothbrush, her shoulders sank. She tapped her pointer finger to the bristles as she considered her next action. The blue bristles do not bend because of the dried leftover solution. The porcelain sink is stained by past attempts to clean. A frown tugs at her lips, and her resolve crumbles.

"One minute," I whisper. "Just give yourself 60 seconds. It doesn't need to be your best work but at least try." I don't know why I bother. She can't hear me. The glass above her sink separates us, but I need her to know she can still try. She does not need to cave in. If my movements were not confined to hers, I would pound the glass to get her attention, but even the efforts of a whisper exhaust me. By some miracle she hears.

She wets the brush and puts toothpaste on it. We both grimace, knowing it will sting. The taste of the mint and pressure on our gums are a familiar pain, bordering on nostalgia. We contemplate not brushing today, after all, how will anyone know under our mask? Yet we have already prepared the tool.

She sets a stopwatch on her phone in an attempt to keep track of the ever elusive time. Then she sticks the brush in her mouth. And I follow.

Our technique is rough. As children our mother told us, if you can't brush everyday then the days you do make sure it counts. For that reason we ignore any pain, we haven't brushed in a week so we have a lot to make up. Perhaps in an alternate world she would have the endurance to complete this task regularly and could go outside more often. In that world, I would follow her to big windows, pristine lakes, and beaches; instead of haunting her in half-empty plastic water bottles and dark computer screens when she waits for the next episode. Our reality is that there is no point in brushing our teeth because they will still need to be cleaned tomorrow. Its importance does not matter, we have already moved to inaction. Sometimes even on good days we cannot bring ourselves to do it, but we do it today.

Starting at the far upper left, we scrub the ivory that has yellowed. We cannot see inside, so we imagine that the film-like plaque is gone and our teeth are now smooth. We turn our attention to the gums. In kindness to ourselves we move slowly and let the gums understand our purpose, then we work harder. The bristles grab on to everything without prejudice. We wince and continue moving the brush back and forth in small circular motions. Our purpose is to clean, at whatever cost. Our eyes meet, as we move to the next quadrant of our mouths we stare into our face.

I know she is searching me for blemishes, I can feel the intensity of her gaze on a cluster of acne growing on my chin. She is considering an appointment to wax our eyebrows, and wonders how we got a sunburn in March, and what to do with our hair today. As for me, my eyes cannot leave hers. She does not visit me as often as she should, always avoiding her reflection so I savor this reunion for everything I can. For every second we meet I spend it all looking at her eyes, the blue with specks of green near the pupil. I swear everytime I get to see her, her eyes are different and I can never get enough.

The stopwatch reads 00: 59. 89, close enough. Our mouth is scrubbed clean, no more white plaque covers our teeth and our gums are red. We spit out the foam solution. It is more pink than white.