

The Seventh

ELIZA VICTORIA

She arrived at the house on a perfect morning—gentle sunlight, light breeze, the pleasant smell of coming rain. She knew, somehow, that it wouldn't be a destructive downpour, just a wispy shower to water the flowers. She knocked on the back gate, and the caretaker's wrinkled face appeared to greet her through the peep hole. "Oh," the old man said. "It's you. Did you have a nice walk?"

She smiled and ignored the old man's strange remark. She got here straight out of the bus, what walk was the old man talking about? Inside the kitchen, she saw a tray with two plates by the sink. One of the plates contained half an omelette and a slice of bread, the other had traces of ketchup and a spoonful or two of rice. Leftovers.

"Is there someone else here?" She wondered who else could be here. Her siblings? Her cousins? The caretaker looked confused, mystified.

"What do you mean?" the old man asked.

She pointed at the tray. "You have a guest?" She didn't mean to sound obnoxious. Her grandmother had that tone with the help, but then the caretaker was not supposed to have guests in the house.

The caretaker took a moment to answer. She noticed him looking at her shoes, the hardened mud like brush strokes, the dried leaves stuck to the soles. Instinctively, she lifted one foot to check what he found so interesting there.

"Are you all right, Julia?" he said.

She frowned. "I am," she said, slowly, putting her foot down again. "Why?"

"Those are our plates," the old man said. "From earlier today? Remember? We had breakfast."

She shook her head. "I just got here."

“You’ve been here seven days.”

Silence, then she started to laugh. “No. I just got here. I literally just got off the bus fifteen minutes ago.”

“No.” The caretaker looked perplexed, and a little frightened.

She sighed. His father was right. The old man was getting confused. Just like her grandmother before she died. “It’s okay. You can go home now. I’ll just call you when I need anything.”

“You’ve been here seven days,” the caretaker said.

She was starting to feel irritated. “No,” she said.

“You have. You were up there, and you were studying. Then after breakfast you went out for a walk.”

She counted to ten in her head. Took a deep breath. “I’ll just call if I need anything,” she said, and steered him out through the kitchen door.

IT WAS A beautiful house with a flourishing back garden and expensive furniture. Her family wasn’t rich, but her grandmother was, so the house with the flat screen TV and the hot shower and central air and a soft couch that didn’t vomit its cotton stuffing was where she threw her birthday parties, where she took her boyfriends, where she stayed for nights on end when she needed some time alone.

The bedroom upstairs was neat and smelled of disinfectant spray—a tangy, lemony odor—and certainly didn’t look or smell like a room where someone had slept for a week. She wondered how the caretaker was doing, if he was still thinking, *If that wasn’t you, then who have I been talking to for seven days?*

She shivered and stood by the window. The window overlooked the garden, with its white chairs and white table. Beneath the table was something she had never seen or noticed before: an opening of a water well, covered with a slab of plywood. Was it new? She had been coming to this house for years and had never seen that well before.

She started unpacking, placing her clothes in the closet, placing the books and her notepad on the study table. She was studying for the engineering board exams, and passing the board would mean she would be able to follow one of her uncles to Qatar, an impossible place where water was more expensive than gasoline. They’d probably give everything for that well outside, she thought.

She didn't want to become an engineer, and she didn't really want to go to Qatar or anywhere, but the job paid a lot of money. When she was younger she thought she would become a scholar, a professor, unpacking theories, learning new languages, travelling to give presentations about her view of the world. In the end it turned out all she ever really wanted was a house with a flat screen TV and a hot shower and central air and a good couch.

OFTEN, SHE WOULD wonder why she even tried so hard. Either she would be in a freak accident or she would live until the ripe old age of 90. Either she would be injured or she would forget all of it, in the end, like her grandmother who died at 88 with her memory jumbled up. Confused, unwanted, moved from one son's house to another. Whatever brightness her grandmother had Julia was never able to witness, which was a tragedy in itself. Lucky number 88. I still have 68 years of lucidity left, Julia thought, sitting at her desk with her structure formulas and her design methods. Sixty-eight years didn't feel like such a long time.

SHE WAS WRONG about the rain. When it fell that night, it fell hard, hammering on the table and the chairs and the flowers, the wind whistling through the gaps in the windows and the doors, through the floorboards, the cold banisters. She tossed and turned in her sleep, hearing something moaning in pain, hearing a clear voice saying, *First a warm bath, then you will be left hanging here until your bones are dislocated.* In her dreams she was sure the moans were coming from the covered well.

SHE WOKE UP later that night to the sound of banging coming from the back of the house. Someone was knocking on the kitchen door. An urgent, insistent knock, like the knock of someone who was being pursued.

But the only person standing outside was a woman in a shirt and a pair of jeans, waiting with her hands folded by her chest, like an orator or an opera singer. Julia had never seen her before.

The woman was searching Julia's face for something, and when she didn't see it she dropped her hands and her shoulders, put on a worried expression. Julia noticed the flashlight sticking out of the pocket of the woman's jeans. "I'm so sorry to bother you," she said, "but I think a kitten of ours fell into your well? I've been hearing it for hours, but I'm not sure if it's real or just my imagination."

Oh, how terrible, Julia thought, but then she remembered the sounds from a few hours ago, the moans cutting through the rain. That wasn't a kitten.

"Can we," the woman said, pointing with her flashlight to the well under the table, "can we check? I'm sorry. I'm too scared to check on my own."

Julia would be terrified, but not at that moment. The terror would come later, much later, after she had returned the woman's smile, after she had said "Yes, of course," after she had walked through the garden, after they had pushed the table aside, after she had knelt by the well's weather-beaten plywood covering and pushed it off with the heels of her palms.

First there was the smell. Putrid, overwhelming, a smell that reminded her of hospitals and animal cages, of powerlessness and shame. It was the smell of feces, urine, vomit. The woman swung her flashlight's beam to the well and Julia absorbed the scene in bits and pieces: a tattered shirt, a stained piece of fabric fashioned like a hammock, a scalp covered in scabs, a hand reaching up toward the opening, toward her, toward light and Julia screamed and scrambled across the ground, scraping the palm of her hands, hitting her forehead on the kitchen door. The woman's shadow fell across her like an eclipse. Julia ran deeper into the house.

"SHOULD WE GO through this again, Julia?" the woman said. The woman's name was Sylvia, a name that floated out of the ether. Why does she know the woman's name? Julia, who had locked herself up in the bedroom, could hear herself huffing like a dog. She couldn't breathe. She crumpled to the floor and hugged her knees, covered her mouth with both hands to stop herself from screaming. She had never before felt terror like this, a terror that seized her insides and made her shiver as though she were pushed into a vat of ice.

"Julia," Sylvia said. The knob turned, and Julia screamed.

"Julia," she said again. "You know what you saw."

There was a woman in the well, and the woman was wearing her face. She looked the way Julia would have looked if her teeth were kicked in, if her hair and fingernails were torn out, if she were dehydrated and starved and tortured for hours. The woman in the well was unrecognizable as Julia, but Julia recognized her with one glance.

"You go into the well and your new version that appears in this house goes through the same stages of fear and denial," Sylvia said on the other side

of the door. “Over and over. You are the seventh version now. What does this tell us, Julia? That perfection does not require memory?”

Sylvia had a key. The door opened and Julia rushed at her, shoving her aside. Julia ran down the stairs and tripped on something—a leg chair, the edge of the carpet, her shoelaces. She fell hard. She sobbed with her face against the floor and couldn’t get up.

“You have legs now,” Sylvia said. “Use them, and sit at the table with me.”

Why was she doing what the woman told her? She should be running now. She should be attacking her. She should be—

“It will come to you,” Sylvia said, disappearing into the kitchen. She came back a few minutes later carrying a tray. On it was a cheese sandwich, a bowl of cookies, and iced tea. Sylvia placed the tray in front of her.

“During your last hour in the well, you always start singing,” Sylvia said. “It’s a simple tune, and it’s always the same tune, but it’s in a language I don’t recognize. Maybe one day you will be able to tell me what you’re singing about.”

“I don’t understand,” Julia said, crying. Weren’t she just studying a few hours ago, figuring out the logistics of living abroad, listening to the rain fall as she fell asleep?

“What did you notice in the sixth version?” Sylvia said. “Hm? What did you notice when you saw the Julia in the well?”

I am not a version, Julia thought but couldn’t say. There is no Julia in the well because I am the only Julia.

Sylvia said, “What was she missing?”

Julia didn’t know what Sylvia was talking about. Then she was reminded again of the smell that hit her when she uncovered the well, the emotions she associated with it. Shame. Powerlessness. Disgust. Why was she reminded of hospitals? Why did the caretaker stare at her feet, why that brilliant smile, that pride in his voice when he asked, *Did you have a nice walk?*

“She didn’t have any legs,” Julia said, and the world tilted slowly, like a leaf on a placid lake.

“It was late at night,” Sylvia began, and continued to tell the story in the bored tone of someone who had been telling the same story over and over

and over, “and it was dark and you were hurrying down the street from work and you didn’t see the opening in the ground, the drain grate without the grate, and you fell and you injured your legs. The fall was only 10 feet. You would have been able to shake that off, but there was debris at the bottom, sharp glass, rusty rotten things, and you struck them, and you weren’t found for hours.” Sylvia sighed, shrugged. *Oh well.* “The doctors had to amputate from the knees down.”

“No,” Julia whispered to herself, touching her legs, but the world was still tilting to fit this new perspective, and the world was telling her *Yes*.

“You wanted your suffering to mean something,” Sylvia said. “It always means something in stories, doesn’t it? Your own Catholic parents had faith that an individual’s suffering can cleanse the world and rid the rest of us of further pain. There are people who refuse medical treatment because they believe suffering has a purpose. If your suffering could bring your legs back, if it could make you better, then the pain would be worth it. Right? That’s what you told her, and she said she could do that, she could show you.”

“Her?” Julia said.

“Or him,” Sylvia said. “Or it. The one you found at the bottom of the drain, the one who held your hand after you got tired of screaming for help.”

Julia felt fear like an electric shock.

“I don’t remember any of this,” she said.

“That’s what all the other versions say,” Sylvia said.

“I don’t know who you are.”

“But you know my name, right? I was there at the hospital, and you told me this story. I was there because my entire family died in a bus crash; what else was there left to believe? But I believed you.” Sylvia glanced at the clock on the wall. “Hour before midnight. Sooner or later you’re going to climb back into the well. I can’t wait to meet your eighth version. You came back with both legs on the seventh day. Maybe on the eighth you would be calmer.” She smiled as though this were a long-standing joke between them.

“I am not going in there,” Julia said.

“I know,” Sylvia said. She grabbed the cheese sandwich from her plate and took a bite. “You always say that, and yet before midnight you’d have lowered yourself in the hammock, begging me to cover the well.”

“What happens in there?” Julia asked, at the same time parsing together a path out of this house, down the road, her legs taking her to the bus station and away.

“Suffering that has meaning,” Sylvia said. She was quiet for a moment. “But you never tell me the specifics. Once, you told me there is someone waiting at the bottom of the well.”

“I want to get out of here,” Julia said, and found herself crying again.

“You always say that, but you never do,” Sylvia said. “Look, I’m not stopping you. Get up and leave if you want.”

Julia wanted to, but her legs felt leaden. Sylvia wore a triumphant smile. *See?* that smile said.

“Remember your grandmother telling your family that she didn’t want to end up like her mother?” Sylvia said. “And her mother before her, and her mother before her. It runs in your family, that awful disease. She said she’d rather die than inflict that kind of burden on her children. Remember how that broke your heart? If only she were still alive. If only we could put her in the well.”

Julia thought of her grandmother sitting at the table and touching her arm to say, “Who bought this? This food looks expensive.” The food came from their kitchen and was cooked by her mother, but in the ruins of her grandmother’s mind she believed she was in a restaurant, enjoying an expensive meal with a bunch of strangers who looked vaguely familiar. *Who bought this?* And Julia, who knew there was no need or time to reason or explain, said, “I did, Lola. I bought this for you.”

There was no need or time to reason or explain.

“What version are you, Sylvia?” Julia asked, changing her tone, making her sound sweeter.

Sylvia wiped crumbs from the corner of her lips. It took a while for her to reply. She looked ashamed. And hungry. “I have never been in the well.”

“But you wanted to go?”

There was no hesitation. “Of course.”

Julia nodded. “Why don’t you go this time, Sylvia?” she said. “I will wait for your new version. I’m sure she will need someone here to explain things to her.”

Sylvia’s eyes filled with tears. “You will do this for me?” she said.

SYLVIA CHATTERED ON as they walked to the well. The midnight air was cold, and Julia could hear nothing but Sylvia's voice, as though everyone else in town had died. "I wonder, does your consciousness move from the old version to the new, like water, or does one, the superior one, just obliterate the other?"

"Aren't you afraid of the pain?" Julia asked. She remembered again the lacerations on the arms of the person in the well, the blood in her mouth.

"I've been through worse," Sylvia said. "Imagine, a driver who fell asleep at the wheel, just three seconds out of his many hours on the expressway, and he obliterates my entire family. Imagine that. Imagine the senselessness of that. At least in the well, my pain would amount to something."

The well was empty. A new hammock was strung up in the middle of it, white and pure. Beneath this white fabric was darkness that went on and on and on.

Sylvia took off her shoes. She sat on the edge of the mouth of the well, and with Julia's hands in hers, slowly lowered herself to place her bare feet on the fabric.

"Do you think I would also sing?" Sylvia asked, her face white as the moon inside the well. "Do you think you'd be able to understand the words?"

Before Julia could think of an answer Sylvia glanced back and suddenly tightened her grip on Julia's hands. "Wait," she said. "Wait. No. Get me out of here. Get me out of here! *Get me out of here!*"

She pulled Sylvia up without a word. Sylvia's grip relaxed, and Julia opened her hands and let go.

Sylvia did not scream, or did not have the chance to. Julia waited for several minutes for the sound of water, for the sound of impact, but it did not come.

She replaced the cover and turned to run back into the house, to get her clothes, to gather her books, to leave this place. She looked up at the last minute and saw the curtain twitch behind her bedroom window. She threw herself at the back gate, for a horrible second thinking it was locked, but the gate yielded, and she burst out of the garden onto the dark road, running as fast and as far as her legs could take her.