Independence Day
By Sarah Langan

The waiting room is shiny and bright but the people inside it are dirty. Trina can't help but stare at the lady in the corner, who's wearing a Hefty Garbage bag instead of clothes. Junkie city.

Trina waits her turn with her dad, Ramesh. He won't be seeing the doctor today. He's never seen the doctor. He says he's not sick, but he's lying. He coughs all the time, and in the mornings she's seen him spit blood and phlegm into the toilet. Last month, the Committee for Ethical Media installed a television camera in their kitchen because he submitted an unapproved audio to the news opera "Environmental Health." Instead of running it under a pseudonym like he'd wanted, the editors called the cops. Now the whole family is under house surveillance. Anybody who wants can flip to channel 9.53256 can see her lard-congealed breakfast table and the weird foam curlers her mother keeps forgetting to take out of her hair in the morning. Her whole eighth grade class knows that Ramesh's pet name for her is Giggles, and that they can't afford fresh milk. Only one-day soured from the bodega on 78th Street. It's humiliating, and so is he.

While they wait, he puts his hand on the back of her neck and squeezes the skin surrounding her port like he's trying to pull it out. He doesn't understand, even though eighteen Patriot Day channels repeat it day-in and day-out: <u>You can't stop progress!</u>

Trina rubs her bruised cheek and glares at Ramesh. He sighs and lets go of her port. It's a victory, but it doesn't make her happy; it only stirs the piss and vinegar stew in her stomach.

She's carrying her list in the pocket of her spandex jeans. Each visit, her dad makes her write down her complaints before they leave the house, then rehearses them with her. He tells her it's for her own protection. But the truth is, Ramesh doesn't give crap about anybody except himself.

He got drunk again last night. Her mom, Drea, accidentally took too many multivitamins and nodded off at the dinner table. Trina pretended she was a duck, and let it roll off her back. Quack, fricking quack. At least dinner was ready. Peanut butter and Fluff: the ambrosia of champions. But after a few drinks, Ramesh got the look. He started talking through his teeth like a growling dog: "They're pushing me out. Looking over my shoulders all the time. Even the janitors. Cameras everywhere. A man can't work like that."

He rubbed his temples while he talked like his thoughts were hurting him, and Trina tried to be sympathetic, but she'd heard this song before. Every time he got drunk, it was the same. Meanwhile, cameras were recording his every word, and where would they live if he got fired? Worse, what if that blood in the sink turned out to be cancer, and in a week or a month from now, he was dead?

In the corner, the television was set to "Entertainment This Second!" Drea pretended to be interested in what Ramesh was saying, but she was looking past him, at the show.

"Those fuckers are killing my work!" Ramesh shouted while banging his fist against the table like a gavel. Everything jumped—even his stinking vodka bottle. The salt shaker rolled into her lap. She was scared to call attention to herself by putting it back, so in her lap it stayed. Her little friend, salty. She and salty, against the world.

She hated salty, all of a sudden, because his sides were greasy with thumbprint scum. She hated her dad, for ruining dinner. She hated their crappy apartment, and the kids at school who

called her pink lung. Mostly, she hated the way Ramesh shouted, because Drea was so out of it, Drea had checked out months ago. It was Trina he was yelling at. I can't fix your problems. I'm thirteen years old, remember? she wanted to say.

But she didn't. It would be too hard to explain. The salt spilled like bad luck, and she let the shaker drop from her lap. It rolled under the table. "Fuck you, you fucking no good drunk," she grumbled under her breath, only the words got away from her. They rushed from her chest, and then burst into a holler that echoed inside the kitchen. She spun at her mother, to make sure it wasn't Drea who'd spoken. But Drea's earpods were inserted. On the television, beauty queens in bathing suits wrestled in a pool of mud for the title of "hottest bitch."

Had she really just said fuck you to her own father? She was already blushing from shame when she felt the blow. It came while her head was turned. Her dad, a dirty fighter. Another reason to hate him. At least it was his open palm and not his fist that tore across her face and knocked her out of her chair.

She lay stunned on the floor. From the table, Drea shook her head, "Don't fight, babies. It's beneath you," she said, but she might have been talking to the mud-slingers.

Trina's face broke like glass. Her lips pulled wide, ready to explode into the worst crying jag of her life, so she squeezed her fists so tight her fingernails pierced her skin, and tried to stay calm. Ramesh was kneeling next to her. His long limbs wobbled drunkenly until he gave up kneeling, and sat down. She flinched as he ran the plastic Smirnov bottle along her swelling cheek. It was so cold it got stuck and pulled her skin. "Let me see. Hold still," he told her.

"You're a terrorist," she sobbed. "That's why they want to get you fired. A dirty Indian terrorist," she said, even though she was half Indian, too.

“Shh,” he said. “I’m sorry. That was unforgivable.” He was still holding the bottle against her skin. He smelled like mice and formaldehyde, and though he wasn’t supposed to, he’d worn his white lab coat home from the office. It made him feel important.

Trina tried to stop crying, but she couldn’t. She pushed the bottle away and hid her face between her knees. It was dark in there, and she wanted to come out and let him hold her, but she hated him so much.

“I’m so sorry,” Ramesh crooned. His long limbs didn’t quite fit under the table, so he was hunched like a man in a dollhouse. The air was warmer, because they were both breathing fast in a small space.

“I mean it, I’m reporting you,” she blubbered. He didn’t answer that. Probably too shocked. It was the meanest thing she could think to say. Then she got up and locked herself in her room. She didn’t come out until morning, when it was time to go to the doctor.

Now, a nurse holding a Styrofoam clipboard calls her name: “Trina?” She’s wearing neon orange short-shorts and a belly ring. All the smart nurses dress in tight clothes. That way they get better tips.

“Trina Narayan?” she asks again.

Her dad nods at her very slowly, like he’s trying to impart one last tacit bit of advice. He thinks he’s a genius or something, but if he’d taken a real job with the Defense Department when the last war started instead of staying in the toxicology lab at New York University, they’d be rich. Instead, his funding got cut, so they had to move from their pretty house in Westchester to a two-bedroom stink-hole with wall-to-wall shag carpet in Jackson Heights, Queens. Now she goes to a school where kids ignite cherry bombs in homeroom, and her only friend is semi-retarded, which is better than the rest of the kids, who are completely retarded.

She touches her bruised cheek for courage. It still stings. “Don’t tell,” Ramesh mouths so that only she can see. He’s so scared that his eyes are bulging. A bug-eyed coward. He’s not a real man, her father.

She smiles in a way that is not meant to reassure. Her lips are closed, tight and angry, and she silently tells him her answer. The blood drains from his face as she walks away.

The examining room is empty. A bright light shines from the corner and she squints. Most people her age only require one visit, then tune-ups every ten years. You’re not allowed treatment more than once a month or you become a vegetable. Still, some people invent false identities and sneak. They wind up wandering the streets and begging for food because they can’t remember where they live.

Problem is, the treatment never works on her. Every time the doctor cuts out the bad stuff, it grows back like a tumor. Her dad tells her it’ll right itself on its own, but he doesn’t know shit. First sign the bad stuff is back, Trina doesn’t gather moss. She calls the doctor. The best part is, no matter how much paperwork Ramesh fills out to cancel her appointments, he never gets it done in time. It’s fun to watch him run around, like a wind-up toy, when she knows that no matter how hard he works, he’ll never get anywhere.

The examining room is pink and round like a womb. She’s wearing a short-sleeved jumper so she won’t have to undress. The needles are plastic, which makes them cheaper, but not as sharp. She has to shove the small one really hard to get it into a vein. Blood squirts. She puts the second needle inside the port in the back of her neck and twists its metal ring until it locks into place. Some people do it standing, but she likes to lie on the cool metal table. Makes the whole thing floaty, like a dream.

The doctor is a five-foot wide metal box in the curved corner of the room. It's attached to the needles, and her, by worn plastic tubes that over time have turned pink from other peoples' blood.

The doctor has a Cyclops eye in the center of his face that lights up white, then red. The needle jabs through her neck and into her skull. Her skull is especially big, so she had to get her port adjusted at a shop in the mall. The sales lady broke off a piece of bone and replaced it with hinged plastic that she has to swipe with rubbing alcohol every night so it doesn't get infected.

The light flicks from red to green. The machine purrs. She holds her breath. This is her fourth time with the doctor, and it is always this moment that feels most wrong. The needles have warmed to the temperature of her blood, but they are still foreign objects; they don't belong inside her skin. Neither does this port that has left her gray matter vulnerable. There are people, mostly the old and young, who experience drip. Their spinal fluid leaks, and they become paralyzed. She wants to rip out the port. She wants to pull out the needles and break them. She wants her booze-hound daddy.

Mostly, she wants to run.

But then the doctor doles his medicine. It travels, colder than her blood, but tingly. First her elbow, then her shoulder, her back, and finally, all the places that are just beginning to get tender. It feels like the boys she wishes would touch her. Like laughing so hard her stomach hurt back in Westchester, when life was easy and she was Giggles. Like her mother's embrace. Like love. It feels just like love.

Begin, a recorded female voice announces over the loudspeaker. Its mechanical quality reassures her. This is too intimate for human witnesses. Too special. Oh, how she loves the doctor.

She pulls the wad of paper from her spandex jeans and starts: “I’m afraid for Lulu.” She always begins with this one, but so far every time they excise it, the worry grows back. “…In school they say that early cultures believed in this thing called a soul. It scares me. Like we’ve all got these ghosts that live inside us. Like I’m haunted by my own ghost.”

Continue, the voice tells her. Its soft voice travels through the tubes so that her port vibrates.

“The actors in the movies—it doesn’t make any sense that they look so different from the people I know. They’re so smooth and smiling— they never have mechanical lungs… I hate the way I look. I wish I could cut myself into little pieces. I wish I was pretty…”

The tube in her arm is getting backflow. Red blood mixes with morphine, pink and pretty like all girls should be. Except she’s brown and pudgy.

“I got so mad last week I bit my hand. You can still see the teeth-marks. They’re smaller than you’d think. Looks like baby teeth, so I told everyone at school it was a neighbor's little kid. Well, actually, nobody asked. But if they did, that’s what I’d tell them.”

She looks at her list. The rest are the items that her father invented: You don’t like sour milk; You want to devote your life to your country. You’re so excited about Patriot Day that you can’t sleep. Then he added, like it was an afterthought, but she knew it wasn’t: You want to be popular but you don’t fit in. You don’t understand that you’re special. Your worries are a gift. She’d felt her face flush when he said that, because suddenly the gig was up, and they both knew that nobody at PS 30 thought she was cool.

She decides she’ll say the honest one. Maybe it’ll stop being true, once she says it. Maybe the doctor is magic. “I’m not pop—“ she starts, and then stops, because if she says the words, her father will be right. Because that smack had been so unexpected, and undeserved.

Because every day for as long as she can remember, things have been worse than the day before, which is how she knows that last night wasn't a fluke. He might be sorry for it, but next time he gets drunk, he'll hit her again.

The morphine has wound all over her, like amniotic fluid. It feels so safe. The doctor will know what to do. She crinkles the paper into a ball, and for the first time, tells the doctor what's on her mind. "I'm so sad…. My mom doesn't take pills because she wants to be happy. She just wants to be numb. I'd take pills if they made me numb, but they don't."

She bites her lip hard until she's sure she won't cry. She'd like the doctor to take everything this time. She'd like to be so empty that she doesn't remember how to breathe.

The machine starts clicking and humming. She gets nervous. Was she wrong to say that pills don't work?

Continue, the voice tells her.

The thing she really wants to say sits on her tongue like a sliver of reconstituted nectarine. She bites down, and lets its juice run down her chin. This is not her problem. She is not accountable. He has done this to her. Her father. The doctor, too.

"I hate my father. He drinks. He hit me last night." She notices, dully, that her voice now echoes. I'm being recorded, she thinks, and then: Good. Now he'll really get in trouble.

"He makes us wear air filters in our chests, even though the EPA says we don't need them. He fills the apartment with them, too. He says he's working on safe cigarettes at the lab, but really he's testing metal dust on mice again. He says it's the debris from the bombs that's killing us. All those falling buildings. He's going to move us to Canada because they're granting amnesty—I heard him talking. He wants to get out before the mandatory ports go into effect."

As she talks, the drug warms her. She's almost sleeping. Sweet, thick dreams. She will be sick from this for days. But for now it is so good. Continue, the voice says, but she doesn't have anything else to say.

"That's all."

Continue.

She tries to make something up, but her thoughts scatter. She licks them like gossamer spider's webs, but can't collect them into coherent strands. They bundle and knot in all the wrong ways. "I have no soul to haunt me," she says, because it reassures her to think this.

Then the pull. This is her least, and most, favorite part. She closes her eyes, and starts floating. Warmth radiates from the port in her neck. She doesn't feel it. There are no nerves up there. Just pulp and grey matter. Heat in tiny lasers breaks the synapses, until all those bad thoughts disappear. First Lulu, then school, then the pills, then her father, then her soul. She can't remember them anymore.

When the stream ends, she nods off. In her dream a little person lives inside of her, and that person is so angry she's eating her own fingers until all that is left is a pair of opposable thumbs. She holds them up, bloody and ragged as the coast of a beach.

The table jiggles as it rescinds. She falls to the floor. The needle in her arm tears her skin on its way out. Blood squirts. The needle in her port, still attached, yanks her head back. "Cripes on a cross!" she mumbles, then with an eye half-open, looks at her watch: 11:15. She's been sleeping for two hours. A personal best. She twists the tube from her port, and starts out just as the sprinklers and ammonia pour from the ceiling, to clean the room for another patient.

Except for the headache that longs for more morphine, she's as light as air when she opens the door to the waiting room. The world is like a flat desert, and she sees nothing for miles. Wings, sparkly and slender as silk threads, are attached to her back; they'll fly her away.

In the waiting room, her father is sitting next to the woman wearing the garbage bag. The woman is really fat, so maybe it's a contractor bag. You could roll her, Trina thinks, and then she giggles.

The doctor has made her so happy!

Her dad stands to greet her. He's tall, dark, and skinny. Long, long ago, her mother used to call him beanpole: My funny beanpole, I could grow cumquats off your arms. My funny beanpole, bend down a few stories, and give me a kiss. Two years ago, the apartment got so hot that he filled the tub with ice water, and they took turns snorkeling for rubber duckies in their bathing suits.

He's frowning like he's worried, and suddenly her stomach turns. Something is wrong. What could it be? She knows, even though she can't remember. She did something bad.

Her temples throb. She cradles her head like she's wounded, because she wants him to know that she's hurting. There's a bruise on her cheek, but she doesn't know how she got it. "Daddy," she says, and she doesn't know why, but she's crying.

It smells like metal out; another explosion in midtown. They walk with their shirtsleeves over their noses to the car. His legs scrunch in the seat, and he has to bend into the steering wheel.

She thinks maybe he's going to hit her, which is stupid, because he's never once hit her in her life. But he only raises his hand to make sure her sleeve stays over her nose. He holds it there, so she doesn't have to talk for a long while. He takes care of her, which, come to think of

it, he's always done. After a long while, he takes his hand away. Out the window, ashes fall like rain. If you think of them as black dandelion wishes, they're almost pretty.

She was mad at him, she realizes, so she told the doctor something very bad. Now he's is in trouble. To keep from sobbing, she puts the heel of her hand in her mouth and bites down. "I'm sorry. I told," she whispers through a mouthful of bone.

He closes his eyes for just a second. "Remember me," he says.

In her mind, a bomb explodes where she sits. Its fire swallows her, and her father, and the car, and the doctor, and their apartment in Queens, and her city, and her country, and the whole world. All ashes, falling down.

He's not yet gone, but already she remembers something as if she is reminiscing at his funeral: before the war, her dad never drank.

"Where do they go?" Trina asks her best friend Lulu the next day at lunch. They're on line in the school cafeteria. She can't remember what she said to the doctor, except it feels queasy, like spoilt milk. It feels gnawing, like missing fingers.

"Where does what go?" Lulu asks. She's got a voice like Darth Vader because her mechanical lung needs a tune-up. When Trina's feeling left out, she takes tiny breaths like hiccoughs until she goes loopy, because Lulu says that having a mechanical lung is like being high on nitrous all the time.

"Where do our thoughts go after we visit the doctor?" Trina asks. In her mind, doctors across the country collect the worries into a giant vat. They're extracted one at a time by the people in charge, who best know what to do with them. Why should the whole world worry, when you can give the job to a select few?

"That's stupid!" Lulu giggles. "There are no problems! That's why we go to the doctor. To get adjusted. It's a throwback from early evolution. Our species worries even when nothing is wrong." It's a line from a commercial for the doctor that Lulu's quoting but Trina knows better than to argue, so instead she shrugs.

Lulu scoops up a ladleful of lard-fried iceberg lettuce onto her Styrofoam tray. She used to be one of the pretty girls, but over the last few years, she's gotten fat and dim-witted. Trina caught her on the way down.

Trina bypasses the lettuce for a vitamin-fortified fluff sandwich, and they sit in the back of the cafeteria by themselves because, except for each other, they don't have any friends.

There are about twenty television screens streaming the same program, "Brick Jensen's Health Challenge." They hang from hooks in the ceiling and descend to eye level at the middle of every table. Lulu is fascinated. Brick Jensen, also known as Mr. Fit, is explaining that five minutes of exercise each day is enough to keep in shape, so long as you do it correctly. You can squeeze your butt while standing, for example, and do three sets of mechanical lung lunges. For perfect arms, you hold your backpack over your head.

The show is interrupted by Mr. Mulrooney, the school principal. He's got a tiny black mustache, so everybody calls him Hitler. The mustache is pencil thin, though. So maybe it's Gay Hitler. Eccentric Hitler. Hitler Lite.

"Two days until Patriot Day!" he announces; a small man trapped inside twenty small screens. It'll be July 4, 2076. The 300th anniversary of the Great Emancipation. "Remember to wear your school colors!"

"If they weren't maroon and orange, maybe," Lulu mumbles. Her wilted lettuce looks like green poop, but she keeps eating it, like she's punishing herself for getting ugly.

“If everybody wears maroon and orange I’ll go blind,’ Trina adds. “Seriously. It’s a health concern. I’ll get dizzy and puke and go blind, not necessarily in that order.”

Lulu wheezes, so Trina punches her backpack until the battery starts humming. She’s done this enough times that it no longer requires acknowledgment. They’re best friends, and that’s what friends are for.

“For those of you without ports, remember to bring your insurance cards.” Hitler says. “And if you’ve got private insurance…. Well,” he smiles tightly, “Nobody here has private insurance.”

Patriot Day is the same day that the law goes into effect, and everybody who can’t afford a private doctor has to get a port. Trina used to be really happy about that. What progress: adjustments for the masses! Better yet, poppies for the masses! But that means her dad will have to get a port and she knows he doesn’t want one. Her stomach feels hollowed out again. Like somebody scooped away her insides with a metal frozen yogurt spoon. She thinks about the Cyclops eye, the list she crinkled into a ball instead of reading. And the morphine. She thinks about that, too, because she misses it already.

Hitler makes a final announcement. He’s the third principal in two years. They keep getting fired for embezzlement. The last guy partnered with Milk of Magnesia, so everybody got free laxatives after lunch. The bathrooms stank, but at least the school colors were blue. She liked that a lot better than Hitler’s pick: who wants free Tang? Everybody knows that trip to the moon was a hoax.

“Ozone levels are too high. No after school sports today,” Hitler says before signing off.

“Bees knees, shit up a tree!” Trina moans. Unless it’s video games, sports are for lesbians and stupid people. Everybody knows that. It’s the running joke on the show everybody’s

watching lately: “Will Brick Jensen Get Laid?!?!” People keep remaking it with their own video cameras, and posting it on their personal television channels. It’s the joke that won’t die. It’s pulling its decaying corpse down the hall with its thumbs. Still, she loves track, and the weather’s only been nice enough once this season.

Because of her natural lungs, Trina is really good at running. She even laps the boys. It’s showing off, but she can’t help it. She loves to run. When you go fast and long enough, it’s like being high, only better. It’s like living, only good.

Most people in this neighborhood get the operation by the time they hit grade school. Stores all over the mall take out your bronchi, and replace them with plastic tubes. That way you never cough when the bombed buildings fall. But so far, Trina doesn’t need the surgery. Thanks to her dad and the time she spent in Westchester, her lungs are clean. Even if it makes you popular, fake lungs look like a bad idea. Sure, you won’t get cancer, but what happens when they rot? Still, she’s an outcast at this school. When she volunteers in class, she doesn’t pant like the rest of them when she says more than a sentence. She doesn’t need to shoot insulin in the girls’ room, either. Sometimes she brings a needle anyway, and fills it with saltwater.

“Sports are for lesbians and stupid people,” Lulu wheezes.

Trina frowns. It’s coming back to her, the stuff that got excised. She wishes it would go away. She wishes she was like everybody else.

“Do you think the doctor helps people? That it’s good to forget?” Trina asks.

Lulu shrugs. “I wouldn’t know. I don’t have any problems.” Then she adds, “I’m feeling much better than yesterday.”

Trina sighs. Lulu always says she’s feeling better, but she coughs more and more. It’s not just the battery that’s low. The tubes are clogged with pus.

“Maybe it’s all a lie,” Trina says. “And we can’t figure it out because the doctor makes us stupid.”

Lulu’s jaw drops. She looks around, because they both know that Trina said a very bad thing. Something so bad that if Lulu reported it, the Committee for Ethical Media would take her away to a re-education center, where the kids get stuck cleaning rubble and bodies.

They look at each other for a while, and finally Lulu smiles like a phony. “You pink lung!” she teases. Only, she’s not kidding, and for the first time in the three years that they’ve been best friends, Trina is on the outside, looking in.

The door is open to the apartment when she gets home, which is new. “Where’s dad?” she asks.

Drea is watching three different programs on the television while instant chatting with her friend next door. Trina wishes she’d inherited Drea’s white skin and blue eyes, but no dice. She’s brown like a terrorist instead.

In big letters in the corner of the screen Trina sees: “Sports are for thesbians and flaccid people!” “Brick Jenson gets me wet!” “Sour milk=de-lite-FULL.” On a side bar are all the quips Drea wrote, but doesn’t plan to send because, unless she dumbs it down, nobody ever knows what she’s talking about: “These ashes are our loon’s call; mad and maudlin.” “Remember, my love, it ends not with a bang, but with a whimper.” “The womb grows like a widening gyre, and even our best suckle its poison.”

Drea was a poet-in-residence at NYU when she met Ramesh at a faculty dinner. As his pick-up line, he told her that the written word was dead. Even then, he compulsively pissed

people off. Trina's the same way. She never intends to offend anybody; stuff just bursts out of her mouth. Half the time, she doesn't even realize she's thinking it.

But instead of getting mad, Drea agreed. "Yeah, books are dead," she said. "So what does that make me for writing poems? Better yet, what does that make you?"

But Drea hasn't written a poem in a decade. Now that everybody self broadcasts audio poems, she says it's like genius and madness; there are so many voices that you can't tell which is which anymore.

"Why was the door open? Was someone here?" Trina asks.

Outside the window, she sees a fire on 78th Street. The Jackson Diner is burning. She smells scorched Indian food. On the television split screen, ten people are competing to be the best art critics. They look at photos of paintings scavenged from the Louvre, and say whether they're any good. Then the judges tell them if they're right, or if the paintings are crap. The second channel is that show with Rhett Butler and Scarlet O'Hara, where instead of breaking up, they get back together. The last channel is their still kitchen. Drea is watching their apartment on channel 9.53256. Suddenly all three programs are interrupted, and Trina moans. It better not be another evacuation. She only just got rid of the lice in her hair from the last time she had to stay at the 48th Street Shelter.

The president comes on screen. He's smiling. He's had a lot of cosmetic surgery, so he looks just like Brick's brother, Brett Jensen. Or maybe he is Brett Jensen. She can't remember.

Remember me, she hears in her mind, like the president is saying it. Her head hurts bad. I worry about Lulu, she thinks, and she knows the thought is not new.

"Good evening," the president says, like he's fancy. Everybody else says, "Hey, America!" Then he reminds everyone about Patriot Day. "I've got a special surprise," he says,

and Drea claps her hands together like it's Ex-Mass morning. "At dusk on Patriot Day, every city in this great country will launch a FIRE WORKS SPECTACULAR!" Then he itemizes the cities: Seattle, Santa Fe, Portland, Boston, New York. He doesn't mention Los Angeles or New Orleans, which makes her think they're still at war with Mexico for earthquake and flood supplies.

"Ummm," her mother says like she's hungry. "I love all those pretty explosions."

"We have explosions every feckin' day, Drea!" Trina reminds her, but it doesn't do much good. Brett Jensen (the president?) has a dimpled smile, which for some reason makes her remember the word soul. A little girl with no hands is haunting her. She looks at her own hands now, and notices that she's been biting them. Teeth indentations are embedded like welts along her fingers.

"Why's the door open? Where's dad?" she asks.

Drea sits up from the couch and looks at Trina like she doesn't recognize her.

"Think," Trina says. "Where was the last place you saw him?"

Drea furrows her brow. Her fingers are swollen from all the texting. She's supposed to use voice prompt, but she prefers typing because it reminds her of writing. Old people!

"I saw him on the television?" Drea asks.

Trina's lower lip quivers. She wants to hit her mom all of a sudden, which makes her even more like her dad, maybe. "Did he go to work this morning? The door is open."

"Oh," Drea says, and slides back into the couch. "Somebody took him, then."

"So where is he?"

She doesn't answer. The president signs off, and new shows start. Their theme songs all sound the same. They plan it that way, so when you're watching a bunch of shows at once it's never discordant.

"I'm lonely, baby. Why don't you come sit with me?" Drea asks, and Trina would like that. They'll share a blanket and kiss toes like they used to. Trina will tell her mother what she did, and her mother will forgive her. Together, they'll figure out what to do. But Trina doesn't sit, because things have changed, and nothing's the way it used to be.

On one of the programs, a dark-skinned girl with brown hair and deep circles under her eyes is standing in a dingy room. Flickering lights cast shadows against her face. On the couch beneath the girl, a sickly-thin woman lays stretched out and half-sleeping. It's weird, because television stars are supposed to be skinny and tan, not a bunch of ugg-os. Then she figures it out. It's her. It's right now. This is her life. The Committee for Ethical Media has added another camera.

In her room, she switches to channels 9.53256 and 9.53257, then presses rewind. She sighs with relief. The reverse record is working. She plays the tapes backward, and sees herself wiping tears from her eyes while talking to her mother on the couch. Was she crying? She doesn't remember that, though she notices now that her eyes are still wet.

She sees stillness. Her mother in the dark with the shades drawn, moving only to swallow vitamins and breathe. Then her dad with each arm held by an officer of the CEM, walking backward into the kitchen. They wrestle a little. Her dad is on the floor. One of the men hits him on the back of the head. But then they all get up again. They let him go, and walk backward out the apartment. The door closes as her dad chews toast into existence. She wishes it had happened like that.

She uses a long metal prong to pull out the old filter. It's black with soot. Then she replaces it with a clean one, and tries not to gag. It's small until it fills with air. Then it expands. Her dad says it's the ultra-fine particles you have to worry about. They get into the deep lungs, where there isn't any hair or phlegm to carry them back out. Nobody at school uses filters. They're expensive. Ramesh steals them from the lab. There's about fifty hidden behind the false wall panel in her bedroom.

As she walks, she remembers. She's not supposed to, but she can't help it. First came the cold table, and then the blinking eye. And then the slap against her cheek, and the echo of her voice as it was recorded. She puts her hand in her mouth and bites down until she draws blood, but it doesn't make her feel any better: her father. She told, and now he's gone.

The main branch of the Committee for Ethical Media is at the old library near Bryant Park in Manhattan. A guard at the subway station orders her to spread her legs, because it looks like she's hiding a bomb up there. He loses interest when she tells him she's got antibiotic resistant syphilis. After an hour, the F train never shows, because the 59th Street Bridge is closed due to a bomb threat. She hikes it north over the Triborough, then grabs the 6 Train downtown. By the time she gets to the CEM it's night, but the city is lit up so bright it feels like day.

She takes a number and waits. The woman sitting next to her is wearing a trash bag. This time, it's white and lemon scented, so slightly less offensive. She falls asleep for a while. When she wakes it's morning, and her number is three spots away. They call her name. She's up in a flash.

"Ramesh Narayan?" she asks.

A woman punches something into a computer. "Rammy Naran? Nope. Next!"

“No, wait. You spelled it wrong. Here.” The woman enters the name again. Then she frowns. “Cremated or buried?”

Trina tries not to hear this. She tries very hard. There is bile on her tongue. “No. He was taken in for voluntary questioning.”

“So it says.” She leans over the counter. Her backpack hissed like a stabbed bum. “Heart attack during interrogation,” she answers. “Cremation or burial?”

Trina’s tries to think, but the words don’t make sense. She’s not sure they’re English. Her hand is in her mouth and she’s biting hard. It tastes like salt. “I love my dad,” she mumbles. “And he loves me.”

“Which? Your insurance covers both,” the woman says. Her backpack is gasping.

Trina thinks about the cold bottle against her cheek. The bruise is still tender, and she touches it now, and pushes hard until it hurts. She’d like it to reverse heal. She’d like to wear the scar for the rest of her life. “It’s a mistake,” she says. “He was going to get us out. I made a mistake.”

The woman shakes her head. “You’re right. There was a mistake.”

Trina’s crying all of a sudden, from relief. “Yes! I knew! They only took him for questioning.” She’s holding onto the counter, because otherwise she’ll fall. “Daddy!” she shouts, “Daddy, where are you?” because maybe he’ll hear her voice in one of the interrogation rooms, and know that she came all the way from Queens to rescue him. He’ll know she’s sorry.

The woman grabs hold of Trina’s wrist like a lobster catching prey. “We couldn’t find next of kin. So the CEM already incinerated him. That’s the mistake. He’s still dead, kid. Now shut your mouth before the guards arrest you, too.” Then she lets go, and places a bar-coded ticket on the counter. “You can pick him up at that address.”

“No,” Trina says. “That’s wrong. Ramesh Narayan. Before the war he gave lectures all over the country. He was an important man.”

“The ticket,” the woman says, only Trina sees that she’s not mad, just tired. Her lips are almost blue from lack of oxygen. “Sure, maybe it’s a mistake, but that’s where you’ll find out.”

She’s panting and wet with sweat by the time she jogs the forty blocks downtown to the East Village. The building’s name comes into view: City Morgue. She stands in front of it for a long while, catching her breath.

Unlike Jackson Heights, a lot of people in Manhattan don’t have mechanical lungs. Instead they’re zipped inside big plastic bubbles equipped with molecular air generators. They’re skinny and they dress in high heels, even the men. They look like a different species. As they pass the front of the building, she thinks about poking holes in their generators. The air will leak slowly, and then they’ll start coughing, just like everybody else.

Once inside the building, she exchanges her ticket for a number, and waits. After a while a guy with no teeth hands her a Styrofoam urn. She’s not sure it’s her dad, but there’s a picture burned into the side. In it, Ramesh is wearing his tan work suit. His dead eyes are closed.

She’d like to eat the urn. That way she’ll never forget. There were the animals that died in his lab. Little spotted mice with pink tongues. They couldn’t survive the debris. There are buildings that fall. The war. There is her mother, who used to laugh. There is her best friend Lulu. They coalesce, like mercury. Like morphine. They bathe her. She is bathed in death.

Perhaps she’ll run out of here, and never stop. There is Canada, like her dad planned. But would they really have gotten there? Or would Patriot Day have come with blood and fireworks, and then gone gently, into another day? She knows the answer, and for once it makes her think

no less of him. He would have anesthetized his new port with vodka, and after a visit or two to the doctor, he'd have become just like everyone else. There was no plan for escape. There was only rage and talk. But these were better than nothing.

I won't forget, she whispers, and she knows she should say it to the ashes, but she can't bring herself to open the urn.

She walks the whole way, and doesn't get home until the next morning. Her feet are bleeding. Squish-squish.

When she walks inside, Drea is on the couch. Trina can tell from her dilated blue eyes that she's been sneaking visits to the doctor.

She puts the ashes on the table. The television is tuned to four channels. This time there is a view of the neighbor's apartment. The weird guy is having sex with his daughter. Drea is sad about that, so she's hiding her face. Trina can't figure out if it's really happening, or a programmed show

She turns off the television. "This is dad," she says.

Drea is quiet. She knows she's supposed to explain, but she doesn't know how. She can't help it; she laughs. This is dad, light as a feather. This is my hand, covered in open sores.

Drea examines the photo, then opens the Styrofoam top. "If this is your father, what does that make me?" she asks.

When Trina wakes the next morning, she can't help it. She forgets she was supposed to remember. She spies Drea running her fingers through the ashes, and goes on automatic pilot. She calls the doctor. He can't squeeze her in until tonight. She uses Lulu's name. She figures Lulu won't care. It's all for a good cause. Just the thought of the needle makes her skin tingle.

Remember me.

Drea is playing the television so loud that it gives her a headache, so even though she'd rather stay home, she walks to school. It's Patriot Day, so everyone is wearing maroon and orange. In her black jeans and t-shirt, Trina sticks out like a bloody thumb. There aren't any classes, just lines of people waiting to sit on gurneys in the auditorium and get their free ports. Along the aisles, they're handing out Tang juice and Fluff sandwiches.

In her mind she tears the ports from kids' skulls, and watches them bleed. She tears out her own port, too. Up on the podium, the seniors are giving testimonials to the underclassmen: "Before my port I wasn't sure, but now I know I'm happy! …This will be the best day of your life.

Hitler interrupts for a special announcement. Something about a pep rally and bonfire tonight after the fireworks. He wants people to bring things to burn. She stops listening until she hears Lulu's name. She's been hiding from Lulu all day, because if she sees her, she'll talk about her dad. She'll say his name.

Hitler Lite continues. "Complications of the complication on the complication," he says. Blah blah blah. "Let's bow our heads for a moment, in memory of Lulu Walker."

Trina's face goes red. It's so hot she's sweating. She doesn't stay to hear any more. She's out the door.

She knows she shouldn't be here. She promised she wouldn't come. She hates him. Then again, she's got no place else to go. "Emergency," she tells the nurse in pleather and vinyl. "I have to see the doctor. Lulu Walker."

She takes a ticket. The woman sitting next to her is wearing a sheet. She's shaking like she needs a fix real bad. Trina doesn't look too closely, because the woman is Drea.

She closes her eyes and thinks about the trickle through her veins. She thinks about emptiness. She thinks about the filter in her lungs full of ashes. The dead are all around her. She's breathing them. And still the buildings topple while the televisions sing.

—Remember me.

—Why? It hurts too much.

"Lulu Walker?" the nurse calls, and she's up in a flash.

Needles inserted. Blood squirted. She lays down. White eye to red to green, she begins. "I worry about the speed of things. I worry you murdered my dad. I murdered my dad. I worry he was right all along, only I hated him so much I didn't see it. I worry this war will never end. It's just a lie to keep us stupid."

Her voice echoes. It's being recorded. They'll think its Lulu, probably.

Continue, it tells her, and she finally recognizes the voice. It's the same lady on "Will Brick Jensen Get Laid?!?" who says that sports are for lesbians and stupid people.

The morphine tingles in her arm. She starts forgetting even though the doctor hasn't entered her port yet. The treatment is finally working, she realizes. It's not brain damage they're after. Everybody remembers eventually, no matter how often they're adjusted. The doctor isn't the cure. It's self-regulation. It's forgetting with the snap of a finger, the promise of a tingle in the arm. Forgetting in the anticipation of pleasure. Forgetting because it's easier, and you're tired of fighting, when every day things get worse instead of better. It's learning to be your own doctor. That's what Patriot Day is all about.

Continue, the woman repeats. She's been paid for her voice, of course. An actress. They do it all the time. Trina thinks she's going to laugh, but instead she is crying as the morphine drips. It doesn't feel good this time; it just feels sick.

Lulu is dead. Her father is dead. Even the living are dead. The laser begins to shoot, and her father is disappearing. The machine is killing her father. Bean Pole with dark circles. They used to swing their feet on the bench in Westchester, side-by-side. The memory disappears. Burned away. She searches for it, but it's gone. Next goes the bathtub, where he taught her to swim. Gone. She is killing her father. She is a murderer. The doctor is a murderer.

She pulls the needle like a plug. Precious morphine drips. She unlocks the port. Click. Then she's kicking the machine. She's beating it senseless with her bitten and scarred hands, because two days ago Ramesh was here. Two days ago, even though he knew she would betray him, he was waiting for her. He loved her. She punches and kicks, until the Cyclops eye shatters. Then she pops the needle inside its gaping wound. The morphine wets the wires, and the doctor's lights go out.

She leaves before they can figure out what she did. It won't be long, though. They'll find her.

She thinks about Canada. It would make her father proud. But she doesn't have the paperwork to leave the state. She could take a train to Westchester, but she's broke. Besides, they'll run her name through the CEM Database. An idea occurs to her, and she likes it. She'll insert a double filter and cross the Triborough at night and walk the old pedestrian path. She'll sleep during the day, and walk as long as it takes. She'll visit those places she's heard about, where there is grass and dirt. Where there are animals, and birdsongs, and she won't need a filter.

She goes home first. The apartment door is wide open, and her father's ashes are scattered on the coffee table. The television is loud. She packs a bag full of filters and vitamin-enriched fluff. Wears it on her shoulders like a mechanical lung. "Mom?" she calls.

Drea is lying on the bed. The bottle of vitamins is empty. Trina's first thought is a bad one. But then Drea opens her eyes. "Sweetie," she moans. "I got lost and had to find a nice policeman to take me home. They put this on my arm, so it doesn't happen again." Drea lifts her wrist, where a barcode has been branded into her skin. "You'd think they'd just write the address. But nobody likes words anymore, do they?"

Trina sits down on the bed. Her mom's head is upside-down, which makes her look alien. "I'm in trouble," she says.

Drea blinks. Her fingernails are ashy.

She'd like to say: I'm leaving. Come with me, mom! But they're being recorded, so instead she stands. "I'll remember both of you."

Drea smiles. "How nice."

She's walking backward out the door, like this is a movie in rewind. They haven't really lived in this hole for three years. Her mother isn't really a junkie. She didn't really rat her father out to the CEM, and get him killed. She isn't really leaving all that she's ever known.

"Bye, mom," she croaks as she crosses the threshold. Then she's running down the steps.

The streets are red, and the sky is ashes. Inside Trina, a girl is chewing the scenery. She's ripping down all the old pictures, and making everything blank. A girl is yelling and shouting and crying. And breathing. And running. And thinking. And remembering. This girl is her.

Feet pounding, she doesn't stop until she's out of breath. When she looks up, a crowd of people has amassed under the Triborough Bridge in Astoria Park. Have they come to arrest her so soon? No, she remembers. It's Patriot Day.

All along the street and sidewalk are floodlights, gurneys, and the sound of drills. The streets look wet, and at first she thinks it's water, but no, it's blood. People stand in lines one-hundred bodies deep, waiting for the messy operation. Scalp wounds bleed. Her sneakers are red.

The sky explodes red, white, and blue. Heads bobble in unison, thousands, and peer into the light. She notices the men with guns. They're here to make sure that everybody, even the people who try to back out, get their ports.

She pushes through the crowd and gets onto the bridge. The road is so thick with people that she can hardly move. Still, she pushes. There are others, she notices, who do not look up at the bright lights in the sky. They navigate the crowd, and try to make their faces blank, but they can't. They're terrified, just like her. One in a hundred. Maybe one in a thousand, but still she spots them. Still, they exist.

Have there always been others, only she's never noticed them before? Or is it that she's never been one of them before? She knows the secret now and it has nothing to do with the doctor. The way to remember is to stop forcing yourself to forget.

The people like her make their way across the bridge while the others stand still, blocking the way. Some are alone, others in small groups of three or four. Heads bent, they steer through the immobile throng. She thinks they're all headed for the same place. Canada or free Vermont. A few are wearing neck kerchiefs, and she realizes it's because they have no ports.

<u>Remember,</u> her father told her. And she will do more than that.

She doesn’t know it’s happening until her breath comes ragged. She’s running along the bridge in blood stained shoes. She’s not sure, but it seems like she’s the first. Others follow. Soon, half the bridge is shaking, pounding. There aren’t many of them, but they’re determined. They are running. It feels so good, the air slapping her face. She was born for this, to run. She will keep running, until she is far away. Until she can watch the fireworks of Patriot Day from some place free.