

Arcanum

“It’s fairly simple surgery,” the doctor said gently, “but I think you understand that.” She put her stethoscope down on the desk, and waited a moment longer. “Can you trust me?”

Anne blanched, then shook her head. “I trust you more than anyone I’ve seen” she began, then laughed and added, “and yeah, I know that probably isn’t saying much.”

They both knew it had been a long road to this office. Five years, on and off, of specialists and tests, and doubting medical practitioners who made Anne feel their confusion was her fault, maybe even evidence that the only thing wrong with her was her belief in her own pain. They guessed, they hypothesized, then, mostly, they gave up. It was almost a relief when they did. Confirmation that she was too much of a puzzle for them to figure out, somehow, and still safe in her own skin.

But it did leave her in pain. That sharp intermittent pain that folded her in two some nights, and made her wonder if there had been thumbtacks hidden in her take-out.

“I trust you” she said simply. “I need a little time, is all.”

“Not too much”, the doctor reached over and covered Anne’s hand with her own. “Don’t take too much time, or things may be harder.”

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The park was empty this time of day. A few nannies walked by with carriages, enjoying a quiet stroll before the school children were out. In another hour the swings would be packed and the roar of pent-up energy exploding around her would fill the stillness. But for now, the

park was quiet. Anne had her choice of benches, and picked one on the edge, a good distance from the playground.

Atypical endometriosis, the doctor had called it. Deeply hidden, unusually located. Even the evidence she'd found was incomplete. "We won't know everything until I can see it," she acknowledged, "but I'm certain it's what is causing your pain."

You have no idea what's causing my pain. The words were so clear in Anne's head she was sure she'd said them aloud. Only the doctor's gentle prompt, "Anne, do you have any questions?" reassured her. "No, no," she said quickly, "I understand...and I'm grateful to have an answer."

Anne had smiled deliberately then, to fend off the doctor's concern. She needed this conversation to end. When she heard the word trust, she relaxed. She knew this detour well, and could answer honestly, letting herself breathe in a bit of the doctor's kindness.

"I'll call your nurse when I'm ready to schedule," she'd said casually as she gathered her things.

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Anne leaned back against the park bench, breathed in the cool spring air, and let the process begin. Ancient images, pieces of her own story, fabrication and fantasy built to cacophony while she sat motionless beneath a blossoming cherry tree. The tightness in her abdomen began, the twisting baseline accompaniment to the swirling images in her mind. Gradually, the noise in her head quieted and the design began taking shape, clear and clean. She got up quickly, anxious to get to her studio and have tools in her hands.

A triptych, wall mounted, done in oils, but sculptural as well; this much she knew. Figures would evolve though time, moving across the panels, but building out as well, pushed by some invisible force, emerging into the clear space of the museum goer's gaze. Eye level, yes, that was important. An internal dialogue pulled her along, masking everything but intention as she unlocked her studio and gathered ingredients.

Gesso has its own texture, a gritty smoothness that gets in the crevices of your hands as you apply it. It fills in the life line, scores the folds, and begins to harden if you do not work fast. It can turn your skin to sculpture. But Anne was quick today, masterful in her movements between canvas and water, gesso and cloth. Oils would come later, she knew, but now, now was the moment she craved.

This was worth everything. She touched the spot low on her right side, where the pain had begun to intensify. She stroked it gently, reassuringly, and though no one was there to hear, she whispered under her breath, cooing, murmuring, as if to a child you would never abandon.