

Alien Jane

by Kelley Eskridge

She came in as a thinskin and we started off badly. Thinskins pissed me off. Everything about them was hopeless: their screams, their red faces, the smell of their blood; and there was always blood because it was night and they came from Emergency. They made me remember where I still was, and that was a terrible thing, a monster thing with nowhere to go, but boiling out of me in a cloud of rage that fogged me for hours sometimes. The ward is where they put you when you have the rage.

“Don’t you bring her in here.”

“Calm down, Rita, go back to your own bed.”

“Don’t you bring her in here.”

“Rita, I won’t tell you again to behave yourself.” Molasses voice and muscles, and she meant it, Madge the Badge, chief white hat of the night shift. The thinskin lay silent as Madge and a no-name nurse made a sling of the sheet under her and moved her onto the empty bed, the one near the door because I liked the window view: it was just the sidewalk to the parking lot, but I could see people walking away. I thought about *away* for a while until the nurses

finished with the sheets and the needles and left me alone with her. Then I got up and took the few steps across the linoleum floor.

“You shouldn’t be in my room, I don’t want you, and if you give me any hassle I’ll hurt you, I swear.”

She had her eyes closed until then but she opened them wide, bright blue. And she laughed, laughed. She howled. Two nurses came running into the room, and one held her down while the other shot her up, and the whole time she made noises until her face turned purple. They shot me too, I hate that, but the worst was the thinskin and how she scared me.

#

She slept almost the whole next day. I got to where I could shake the sleepydrugs off pretty fast, but she was an amateur, down for the long count. The nurses had her under Close Observation; they came in every fifteen minutes to check on her. “She’s still gone, what did you people give her, can I have some?” I kept saying, until they finally made me leave the room. I thought maybe she didn’t want to come back up, maybe wouldn’t, but later I looked in from the hall and there she was cross-legged in the bed, looking fuzzbrained, the blankets and sheets twisted up around her waist.

“You’re up. I’ve been up for ages. You missed breakfast, you missed lunch but it was crap, lunch I mean, so I guess you’re better off, and dinner’ll be here soon. You wanna come down to the TV room and watch *Remington Steele*?”

She blinked for a while and then she said, “I have to go to the bathroom.” She had a low voice, the kind that always makes me want to practice so I can sound like that. You can talk onto a tape to do it. I used to think about being an actress, but that was all crap too, getting up in front of people and letting them see you cry.

I got my first good look at her while she was trying to get out of bed: older than me, maybe twenty-five, yellow dirty hair, and those blue eyes. She was a mess, bandages everywhere, and where she wasn’t all wrapped up she was the pastypale color that white people get when they eat meat all the time and don’t work it off. She made my fingers itch to stuff an entire head of broccoli down her throat. She moved slow; and she looked at me. She pulled one leg out of the covers, and looked at me, then the other, and looked, until I finally

said, “You see something you don’t like?”

She shook her head. “Last night...you said...”

“Oh, *hijumadre*, forget it, I don’t like nights and I don’t like thinskins, but I won’t hurt you. I was just being mean.”

“Thinskins?”

“Yeah. New patients, you know, start by crying and yelling that they don’t belong up here with all the rest of us really crazy people, which of course they aren’t, crazy I mean, and it’s all a mistake. Then they get pitiful for a while and won’t talk to anyone and shake all the time. They go off if you say boo to them. Thin skinned.”

“Right.” She was on her feet by this time, more bandage than body. “Well, I’ll just have to remember that I belong here,” and then she looked like she might cry, which I hate. I started to drift out and let her get herself back, but I don’t know, something about her...I don’t know. Anyway, I put out one arm and said, “Bathroom’s over here,” and walked her to the door.

A nurse came in then and took over, she gave me a look and said to the thinskin, “Everything okay here?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

She was better when I came back, but I didn’t want to talk and I guess neither did she, except she said what’s your name and I said Rita and she said Jane.

#

She had Dr. Rousseau who was my doctor and the best, not someone that I wanted to share with creepy Jane; Rousseau, who half of us would have swallowed rocks for, and even the nurses liked. Rousseau spent a lot of time on Jane, but Jane wouldn’t talk much more to her than she would to anybody else, which I respected in a way. She wouldn’t even talk to Tommy Gee.

“Does she say much to you when you’re together on your own, without any doctors around? Does she seem to communicate better with her peers?” Tommy Gee was always doing that, mixing up the stupid patients talk with the doctor talk so you never knew if he meant it for you or some white coat standing behind you. His real name was Gian—

something–Italian but we called him Tommy Gee–for–gee–whiz because that’s how he was about everything, including being Rousseau’s intern.

“If you mean does she relax when she’s with the rest of us mentals then no, Dr. Gee, I guess she isn’t comm–you–nee–cating well at all. Maybe they don’t talk on whatever planet she’s from.”

“That doesn’t sound very supportive, Rita.”

“You’re the doctor, you support her.”

And he tried to, he was always coming around after her sessions with Rousseau, to talk to her, see if there was anything he could do to get her to open up. She was his special project.

I got used to having her in my room because she was so quiet I didn’t notice her half the time. I talked to Rousseau about that in one morning session, and she just said *hmmm* and wrote it down.

“I think Tommy Gee likes her, too, but she probably hasn’t even noticed how stupid he gets around her.”

“Hmmm.”

“I guess it’ll be okay having her there, I mean, I probably won’t even notice when she’s gone until two days later.”

Rousseau put the cap back on her pen and sat back in her chair. There was a little mended place near the pocket of her doctor coat. The first time I saw Rousseau was twenty hours after I came into Emergency, when they moved me up to the locked ward. She asked me if I wanted to talk and I said no like always, feeling like a rock in the gutter when the rainwater runs over it pushing it little by little toward that big dark hole going down. I said no, and then I saw the mark on her coat, the careful clumsy darn, and I could never explain how it made me feel; but then it was okay to talk to this woman Rousseau.

She turned the pen over in her fingers, gave me a doctor look. “Haven’t you thought that you might be the first to leave?” she asked.

#

I spent the rest of the morning like always, huddled up with Terry Louise on the bench down the hall from the nurses’ station: her smoking cigarettes until she could hide behind the

cloud they made; me trying to find some way to make my back comfortable against the wood slats, and making kissy noises at the boy orderlies when they went by, because I hated the way they always picked on the little scared ones to rub up against when they thought no one was looking. They walked itchy around me after what happened that one time.

“I hate it when she does that,” I said. “Why does she have to talk about me leaving?”

“Just say no, babe,” Terry Louise said through a mouthful of smoke.

“Can’t keep saying no forever.”

#

Jane’s bandages came off, and she was all new pink skin on her arms and legs, like someone had decided she was a big fish that needed scaling. “She did it to herself,” Terry Louise said one morning from behind her smoke.

“No way.”

“Uh huh. Why do you think she’s in here? This isn’t a plastic surgery ward.”

“No one has the guts to do that to themselves. There’s no way she could have got past the first leg.”

“Madge the Badge was talking to one of the student nurses last night. So unless the meaning of self-inflicted has changed while I’ve been away, No Brain Jane is sicker than we are.”

“We’re not sick.”

“Stop squirming around and sit still for half a minute, Rita, you look like something I’d like to bait a hook with,” Terry Louise said. The old scars down the inside of her dark arms showed plainly when she raised the cigarette to her mouth. She smiled.

#

Susan came to see me over the weekend. She made me feel like she was holding my soul when she touched me: I wished Jane would disappear, but she was right there, watching.

“Suze, this is my new roommate Jane.” I rolled my eyes, but not where Jane could see.

Susan leaned across the gap between our beds and held out her hand. “Hi.”

Jane picked lint balls off her blanket.

Susan stood with her hand out. Jane wouldn’t look at it.

“You shake her goddamned hand, you pink turd; I’ll hurt you worse than whoever did you the last time.”

“Rita, shut up.” Susan put her hand down. Jane was shaking and squeezing her fingers open and closed around great fistfuls of blanket. Her eyes were shut tight, so she didn’t see me reach for her.

“Back off, Rita.”

Susan got me out of the room, down the hall. She left bruises on my arm.

“Don’t hang onto it. I don’t care, I don’t even know her. Anyway she must be hurt pretty bad.”

“Fuck her. Everybody’s hurt.”

That was all it took to spoil my day with Susan, just ten seconds of goddamned Jane. When Suze finally left we were both strung tight, dancing around each other like beads on a wire. I glided back into my room like running on electric current.

It came out at Jane then, all my meanness in evil words, and Jane just closed her eyes and bit down on her lip to keep from crying; and when I finally stopped, she opened her mouth and said something that might have been, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” but it was hard to tell around all the bright red where she had chewed her lip right through.

#

The lip needed stitches. “Frankenjane,” Terry Louise chortled up and down the hall, “Frankenjane, feels no pain.”

“Shut up, Terry Louise.”

“Well, excuse me, honey, I meant to say Princess Jane. Princess Jane, so insane—“

“Shut up!”

“Humph,” Terry Louise said, and lit another cigarette.

“She didn’t even know she’d done it.”

“I know, you told me seven times already—”

“She practically bit her lip *off*, I could see her teeth right through it, and her tongue was all dark red—”

“Rita—”

“Rousseau said it wasn’t my fault, but we all have to be careful, we have to be careful, she’s always getting hurt and not knowing because she can’t feel the pain and you were right, she did that other stuff to herself, to her own self, it’s sick, how could anyone do that and not feel it, it’s *sick*, she just chewed herself *up*—” and I couldn’t stop talking, faster and faster, couldn’t stop even when Terry Louise ran for Madge the Badge.

#

It took a long time to wake up from the needlesleep the next day. I was still in bed when Rousseau and Tommy Gee came in with Jane. I wanted to open my eyes, to say I’m sorry, but the drug was like a staircase that I had to climb, and every time I got to the top I would be back at the bottom again: like big wheels in my head turning all night, so I was more tired than if they had just let me cry for a while.

“Thank you for seeing Dr. Novak,” Rousseau said to Jane. “Do you have any questions about the kind of testing he wants to do? I know he might not have explained things completely, he’s so excited about your condition....”

Jane was quiet.

“Please understand how important this is,” Rousseau went on. “No one here has had the opportunity to examine congenital insensitivity to pain; it’s very rare, and there are so many things we want to know....”

“I’m not a lab animal.”

“No, you’re not. No one will treat you that way. You’re a person with an unusual condition, and with your help we can learn the best ways to deal with other people who have it. We may be able to help you find ways to live with it. I promise no one will hurt you...I mean...”

“I know what you mean, Doctor.” Jane sounded a hundred years old, tired and thin-voiced.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. No one will make you,” Tommy said gently.

“Will you excuse us for a moment, Jane?” Rousseau said. I felt her and Tommy move past me toward the window, their footsteps sending small shudders through the bed and the

bones of my skull.

Rousseau kept her voice low. “Tommy, I expect you to back me up on this.”

“I just don’t think we should push her. She’s only just started to connect with us. It’s a little soon to ask her to include someone else in that trust.”

“Dr. Novak is one of our best research neurologists. I think we should be supporting Jane’s opportunity to work with him.”

There was a silence that seemed long.

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this. I know you don’t support his research funding, you even wrote a letter about it to the Chief of Neurology last year.”

“How did you know about that?”

“Everybody knows.”

Rousseau’s voice suddenly sounded very close, sharp. “Great. Then maybe everyone should know that I have since retracted that letter and encouraged several of my patients to participate in Dr. Novak’s studies. Including Jane, if she’s willing.”

“I still don’t think—”

“Thank you, Doctor,” and that didn’t sound like any voice I’d ever heard come out of Rousseau; *what’s wrong* I wanted to say but I couldn’t open my eyes. I heard Tommy Gee thump out of the room.

Then Rousseau took a deep breath and walked past me to Jane’s bed.

“Well, I just need you to sign this release.”

I knew I should open my eyes, but I couldn’t stop climbing stairs inside my head. *No*, I tried to say, *no no*, but I could only make a little noise. “Go to sleep, Rita,” Rousseau said, and pulled the curtain across between me and Jane.

#

She became Silent Jane again, and I saw less and less of her because she had started the testing, and once the lab rats got hold of her they didn’t want to give her up. The nurses talked about it up and down the halls, even Madge who was such a porcupine for rules; so we all heard about Jane in the lab being electroshocked and pinpricked and nerve pressed and never feeling a thing, and how it was something you were born with, and that nothing that happened

to you ever hurt, no matter how bad it was. Terry Louise said it was kind of neat, and Jane was like the star of one of those old flying saucer movies where the alien takes over your body, so you look like a human but you're not.

#

One day in the room, I wanted to say I was sorry.

"Forget it."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Stupid. Stupid, stupid. No one can hurt me. They've been trying for a week now. Go ahead, do your best."

That wasn't what I meant, I thought, and I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just went on sitting on the edge of my bed rubbing my fingers down the little nubby rows of the bedspread. Jane lay on her back, arms straight by her sides, toes pointed at the ceiling. Her pajamas were dirty around the seams. She looked very thin, greasy with fatigue. She kept absolutely still. She moved only to breathe, and she wouldn't look at me.

I thought I would lay down too like that and look at the ceiling, and be very, very still. The ceiling was grey and restful. I wondered, if Jane and I lay in the same room long enough, would we start breathing together? When I closed my eyes I could hear everything. I heard orderlies wheeling medicine carts past our open door, the pills hissing in the tiny paper cups, little insects full of honey and poison; nurses in rubber soles; Terry Louise in paper slippers; Tommy Gee in his pointy leather shoes; Dr. Rousseau in heels: all stopping at our door, heads bent around the jamb looking in at Jane and me laid out like bodies on the back tables of funeral parlors, waiting to be made pretty enough to be seen by the living. *Go away*, I thought, *go away*, and they all did, while Jane and I breathed together and the morning light turned grey under the weight of wet clouds and the light in the room dimmed into something soft and private.

After a long time the old pictures came back into my head, and this time it was okay, okay to let the pictures move through me while the light was cool and the room was quiet with the sound of our breath like slow waves on a beach. The pictures turned into words, and I told myself to Jane.

“When I was little I wanted to wear jeans and climb up the big oak tree onto the garage roof and play pirates for the rest of my life. I could see everything from there. I thought I was queen of the world.

“Down the road from us was a big field where the grass grew way as high as my waist, all green and reedy, so it whispered when the wind went over it. I would run through it with my arms flung out wide, as fast as I could, so the wind would pick me up and fly me away. But I would always lose my breath too soon and fall down, into the green and the smell of warm wet dirt with just a strip of sky showing overhead, and I would have this whole world that was just for me, just mine.”

I breathed gently and thought about my green place, and Jane was there; I could feel her in the grass wanting to run.

“When I was twelve, they took it away. They decided it was time for me to start being a girl like my sisters and my mother, and they took away my overalls and made me put on shoes that hurt my feet. I tried to climb anyway, and my dress got caught around my waist and under my arms so I couldn’t move, and I knew I could never run in those shoes. I looked around and saw all the women I knew never running, never moving, weak and tired and bound up, and I couldn’t believe my parents would do that to me, that they would tie me up like a box of groceries ready to be delivered. I said I wouldn’t do it; I was standing in the dining room in these clothes that felt like ropes around me, and I said I won’t, I won’t... My father took me by the arm and locked me in the hall closet with the winter coats. It was dark, and I couldn’t move in those clothes, and the shoes were too narrow for my feet, they hurt.... I think it was those shoes did something funny to my mind. I think they were why I hung my Christmas doll up by one foot over my father’s favorite chair in the living room and set fire to it...to the doll, I mean. I lit the match and put it right up against the hair and the whole thing melted and dripped onto the place in the chair that was rubbed shiny from my father. The house smelled for weeks.

“Then I was always in trouble. Always fighting. I burned more things, I tried to run away. I hurt my little sister bad one time with a rake. Everything just got worse. It’s better now I’m not with them anymore.”

Jane said nothing.

“Maybe it’s better you’re here now.”

Jane breathed.

“I stole things, I got caught. My parents gave me up to the court. My mother cried, said she couldn’t do anything with me. She’s Catholic, she’ll carry it forever. I spit at the judge. That’s what got me away from my folks, spitting at the judge. He didn’t care about the broken windows and the badmouthing and the knife that time...he just didn’t like me spitting at him. Spoiled his day.”

Maybe Jane smiled, maybe not.

“But it all just hurt too much after a while. When you fall down out there in the world it isn’t green and soft, it hurts.... I met Suze in that place for girls where they sent me...but it was too late and I felt so bad and I tried—”

I thought of Jane’s legs and arms.

“They have to put you in here for that, and at first I hated it, it was like the closet again. But now there’s Rousseau and Terry Louise.

“I don’t do those things anymore, not really. I still...you know, I still say things sometimes, but even then it’s like I only do it to make myself feel bad. I guess the meanness is going out of me. Rousseau says I’m better. She wanted me to leave a few months ago...but I screwed up, I did it again...one of the orderlies, that stupid Jackson pissed me off. But I could have been out only I...I couldn’t remember anymore how it felt, running in the grass.”

Wax Jane, silent Jane. Ceiling—staring Jane.

“Suze is what I have left, if I mess that up I don’t know what would happen. So I get funny sometimes. I guess you don’t have to shake her hand if you don’t want to.”

I closed my eyes. It surprised me when she answered. Her voice sounded like she hadn’t used it in a long time.

“I saw how she held you, how she touched you, you know? And I thought...how lucky you were that someone would touch you like that. And then she held out her hand to me...I couldn’t take it. It would kill me right now to have anyone be that nice to me. I’d rather spend all day with those doctors poking wires in me than one second with your girlfriend’s hand in

mine.”

There was something in the way she said it; I saw again my father’s face when he found the doll in a stinking puddle, and my mother saying *how could you, how could you*, but never answering her own question. Jane reminded me of how the world can be so different sometimes from what we expected. I got up and poured her a cup of water and put it on the table by her bed. I knew she wouldn’t want me to touch her, even though I would have liked maybe just to hold her hand, not like with Suze, but only because she was scared and in a lonely place. I crawled back onto my bed and turned on my side away from her, blinking against the light. I thought that in my life I had been little Rita, and Rita full of rage, and crazy Rita, and now maybe I would be some other Rita: but I couldn’t see her, I didn’t know if she would be someone who could run through the world and not fall down.

#

Rousseau came into my room the next morning. She looked funny, and she said a strange thing: “Rita, please come with me down to the lab.”

“Why?”

“Jane is asking for you. I’d like you to go be with her, if you don’t mind.”

We walked down the hall. Rousseau started for the elevator and I said, “I want the stairs, okay?”

She turned back so fast she almost caught Weird Bob’s visiting sister with her elbow. “Sorry, I forgot about the claustrophobia.” She didn’t apologize to the sister. That and the forgetting and the asking in the first place made three strange things.

We walked down the stairs. I went first. “Three floors down,” she said. She was close, only a step or two behind me. Her smell came down over me like green apples.

“Rita...you know that Jane agreed to work on these experiments with Doctor Novak. She’s a volunteer. I just want you to remember when you see her...I don’t want you to think...she isn’t being *hurt*...” she said in a queer, rushed voice that didn’t even sound like Rousseau. I stopped. Her hands were jammed into the pockets of her white coat, and her face was turned to the wall, and she wouldn’t look at me.

That was the strangest thing of all, and it scared me. It wasn’t Rousseau standing over

me, her red hair sparking under the stairwell light. My doctor wasn't scared; my doctor was an amazon, a mother confessor, a carrier of fearlessness that she would breed into me like a new branch grafted onto a young tree. My doctor wasn't this person who was saying, "Just be calm and don't worry, everything will be fine."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Let's go."

My slippers rustled on the stair tread and on the linoleum of the hall when we went through the landing door. I followed the stripes painted on the wall, around and around the hallways like a maze. We came to a locked ward door and a nurses' station beyond it. The two men behind the desk wouldn't let me in until they checked with Novak on the telephone. The brown-haired one had a badge with a metal clip that he tried to put on me, and I wondered if I would have to hurt him, but Rousseau said, "Don't touch her."

"Doctor?"

"Let her put it on herself."

Brown hair rolled his eyes and handed me the badge dangling between two fingertips, arm outstretched. Rousseau said nothing, but she was shaking just a little as we went down the hall, we could hear brown hair say something to the other one, and they both laughed, and I didn't like being there at all, in a place I didn't know, with strangers.

The hall was long and mostly bare, with only a few metal-backed chairs next to closed doors. The air smelled like ammonia and sweat and burned electrical wires. It was quiet except for our breathing, the *rsbbb rsbbb* sounds of our clothes and Rousseau's hard-heeled, strong step. Then I began to hear another sound, a rise and fall of muffled noise like music, but something about it made me want to walk faster, and then it was Jane screaming and I began to run.

The place where they had her was at the end of the hall, a high-ceilinged room that made an echo out of Jane. The lab was full of white: white-coated doctors, orderlies in white pants and shirts, Jane in her cotton pajamas with her rolling eyes that showed white and blue, white and blue. She sat in a wooden chair with a high back and arms. Thin rainbows of color twisted out of her head, wires running out of her scalp into the machines around her. More

wires with small discs on the end lay taped like lollipop strings against her neck; her left wrist; her pink-scarred calf; her ankle; under her nightgown at her heart. She sat very straight in the chair because her shins and forearms and ribs and head were belted against the wood with padded ties the color that white people call flesh, and I wondered if they thought that no one would see the ties because they were the flesh of Jane. Jane was screaming around a rubber mouthpiece that showed tan and wet from her saliva every time her lips pulled back—not terror screams but more like some giant grief, some last precious thing taken away. The room was full of her smell.

I couldn't go in. I stood at the door and I couldn't step into what I saw in that room. Everyone except Jane had stopped in mid-motion; they stared at us with the glazed otherplace look of people caught in the middle of some terrible thing like rape or butchery, the kind of act so horrible that while it is happening the doing of it removes you from all human space. I tried to turn around, but Rousseau was right behind me with her hands braced against the door frame, leaning into it like she would push the whole thing down. Then there was nowhere to go but ahead.

"Goddammit, goddammit," Rousseau was muttering as she moved in behind me.

"What are they doing, what are they doing to Jane?" I said but she didn't hear me. Novak came over and stood in front of us like he was trying to keep us from coming any further in.

"Jesus Christ, what is happening here? I told you to stop the goddamned test until I could get back." Rousseau's voice was low. I felt squeezed between her and Novak.

"Calm down, nothing happened, she's just upset."

"She's still my patient. You had no right."

"Nobody has done anything to hurt her. Christ, Elaine, I'm a doctor, I don't—" Jane stopped screaming, suddenly, like a light turning off. Spit ran down her chin. The machines buzzed and the paper strips whispered onto the floor. A woman with a needle stepped over the coiled electrical cords toward Jane, and I could feel myself tense.

"It's okay, Rita," Rousseau said. "I'll get someone to take you back to the ward."

"No." I pulled out from between them, went toward Jane. Behind me I heard Rousseau

start in on Novak. I felt proud of her again, fighting for Jane; then I was standing in front of the woman with the needle and she turned toward me. “Leave her alone,” Rousseau said, and the needle went away. Jane saw me and tried to move. I didn’t know if she was trying to get away or get closer, and for a moment I remembered the Jane who didn’t want to be touched in love, the Jane who would rather stay different in her wires and straps, apart from people, alien Jane; and the Rita who always reached out with hurting hands. Then I unbuckled all the straps and put my arms around her, and she didn’t pull away.

The other people in the lab began to move then, but they didn’t seem to know what to do or where to go. I didn’t want them to touch Jane but they did; they took the wires off her head and peeled them off her legs. They had to reach under me to get to her arms and chest. There was a piece of metal under one white bandage on her arm. They took the metal and left the bandage. They took the mouthpiece, but no one wiped her wet chin so I dried her with the corner of my robe. There was a funny smell about her, something burning; fear–sweat I thought.

Rousseau came over, with Novak following. They squeezed around me. Jane closed her eyes.

“Let me see her, Rita.” And so I had to let go. My hands still felt full of her even when they were empty.

Rousseau said something to Jane I couldn’t hear. Jane shook her head, eyes still shut, face pale and moist under the hot lights.

“What’s this?” Rousseau said.

She had found the bandage on Jane’s arm. When she peeled it back, the arm was white around a stripe of red, and in the center of the stripe was a blister, raw and runny. The smell was worse with the bandage off.

Rousseau looked up at Novak. Being next to her made me feel cold.

“It was an accident,” he said. “We were testing her for heat response, one of the techs pushed the dial up a little too high.” He shifted, jammed his hands into his coat pockets, rolled his eyes like he thought Rousseau was being ridiculous. She still hadn’t spoken. She was so tense I thought she might break apart if she made a sound.

“Oh, come on, Elaine. Nobody got hurt.”

“What do you call this?” Her voice was very soft.

“I call it an accident, for chrissakes. It’s no big deal. She didn’t feel a thing.”

Jane began to cry.

Rousseau put the bandage back over the wound and smoothed down the tape. She stood up. “I’m reporting this,” she said to him, still speaking softly. “I won’t let you harm one of my patients, not that.” It was like she was talking to herself.

“She’s not really your patient any more.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I already have. She signed the consent form; she’s a volunteer. I can do her a lot of good.”

“You don’t have enough clout for this; I don’t care what kind of strings the Chief of Neuro pulls for you this time.”

“Try me,” Novak said. “But you’d better be ready, Elaine, because you’ll have to go across country to find a job after I’m finished with you.”

“Jesus,” Rousseau said thickly.

“Jane is the professional opportunity of a lifetime,” Novak went on, “and you don’t have the slightest idea of what to do with her. But I do.”

It felt like a punch in the stomach, the sick-making breathless kind. *It isn’t true*, I wanted to say, and then I saw Rousseau’s face like still water, and I turned away so I wouldn’t have to watch while Novak put one arm around her and led her away, saying softly, persuasively, “Don’t be upset. I didn’t mean to upset you. Jane will be fine with me, I promise, she’ll be fine, and you can still manage her therapy, keep an eye on her, why don’t we just go have a cup of coffee and talk it over,” and I moved closer to Jane and she grabbed me, pulled me in, and I realized she was whispering, her voice becoming more clear as Novak and Rousseau moved away.

“...it keeps you safe, keeps you safe, the pain keeps you safe, because it hurts and you know something’s wrong. People like me die if we’re not careful; we pierce our lungs with a broken rib we didn’t know we had; we smile and eat dinner while our appendix bursts inside

us; we hold our hands out over the fire when we're children and laugh while the skin turns black. Pain keeps you safe. It's how you keep alive, how you stay whole, it's such a human thing, and I don't have it. I don't have it. And you people...you think...no one ever asked if I could—but I can, I can, I can feel a touch or a kiss, I can feel your arms around me, I can feel my life, and I can feel hopeful, and scared, and I can see my days stretching out before me in this place while they forget and leave the heat on too long again and again and again, just to see, just to see me not knowing until I smell my own skin burning and realize. And when I look at them they aren't human anymore, they aren't the people that bring me ginger ale and smile at me. They're the people that turn up the dial...and they hate me because I didn't make them stop, and now they have to know this thing about themselves. They'll never let me go."

I held her tight. "Tell them," I said. "Tell them like you told me. You can make them stop, Jane, you don't have to—"

"I do have to, Rita, I do, I have to be... I keep thinking that they'll find a way to hurt me the way they want to, something that will work, and then I'll be okay, I'll be safe, I'll be like everybody else, and I won't have to be alone anymore."

And then I understood that the smell in the room and the rawness under the bandage was her pain, her alien pain; and I suddenly knew how she might have taken a knife and stripped her own skin away, earnestly, fiercely, trying to see what made her different, find it and cut it out, and take away the alien and just be Jane.

I held her. There was nothing I could say.

#

The next day Jane was transferred to the locked ward upstairs. Tommy Gee didn't want to let them take her. "There's a mistake," he said. "Wait for Dr. Rousseau. She'll be here in just a minute." But I knew she wasn't coming. "I'll find her," he said, and went running down the hall.

Jane stood just inside the room, one step from the hallway that would take her further inside her fear and her need, and she smiled. "I'll come see you when I'm better," she said. "You and Susan."

"Yes," I said.

“We’ll go to the beach,” she said. “We’ll spend all day. We’ll swim and lie on a blanket and eat sandwiches from a cooler. We’ll get ice cream. We’ll go for a walk and find crabs and sand dollars. We’ll get sunburned and you’ll press your finger against my shoulder, it will stand out white and oh, I’ll say, oh, it hurts.”

“Yes,” I said, “it will hurt.”

She looked at me like she was flying, and then she went out the door.

I found my jeans and a sweatshirt and sneakers and put them on, and packed my things into my duffel bag that had been stuffed into the back of the closet for so long. I went down to the nurses station, passing Terry Louise on the way. “Where are you going?” she said.

“To the beach.”

“What?”

“Bye,” I said, and I could feel her watching me all the way down the hall, so surprised she forgot how much she liked to have the last word.

“You can’t leave,” the day nurse said uncertainly.

“This is the open ward, amiga, I can walk out of here anytime I want.”

“You aren’t a voluntary patient, you have to have your doctor’s signature.”

I don’t have a doctor anymore, I wanted to say, and then Tommy Gee was there looking pale and tense. He saw my bag.

“I’ll sign for this patient.”

“Did you find Rousseau?” I said.

“I talked to her.” He looked past me down the hall. “She’s gone.”

I wasn’t sure who he meant, Rousseau or Jane, but I nodded.

#

I walked down five flights of stairs to the lobby entrance doors, and stopped. I looked back across the open space, full of people with flowers, new babies, people sleeping on couches, people crying, people going home. Two women went past me, one with a new white cast on her arm, the other one saying, “Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

The hurt one bit her lip and shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh yes it does,” I said. I walked to the door and thought, *I will be Rita running in the grass,*

and took the first step out.