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## Those last days of summer

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That summer stretched yearlong and we were always giving birth. We tried to make a game of it at first – taking turns in the narrow cells and pitching our cries like songs but towards the end we were either just fat or skin. The cells formed a long hall, lit sixteen hours a day and always the same: a fearsome golden light coming from the roof; particles of skin floating through the air, in our throats, our faces; the sisters above us and the sisters below. We were all born to the cell and none of us, not our mothers or their mothers before that, really knew if there was anything but the slanting cage floor, our cellmates, the heat.

One of us had heard stories though. Said there was something more than standing and death.

‘What is it?’ we asked her.

‘Winter,’ she said.

‘And what else?’

‘Darkness.’

One of us had seen her sister die, not two cells over. Sensed the familiar life coming to an end and it gave her such a shock her toes clenched over the bars of the floor. They couldn’t get her loose. Another thought of us all as sisters and rubbed her raw skin against the bleeding cage when another passed away. The guards would bring in someone new and after a while

she'd forget and call her sister too.

Some of us didn't care, were beyond caring. We felt the rage of the endless day beat like wings that we bit and scratched at. When she fell we stood on her, flattening her head into the bruising bars. When we gave birth it was over her body, even though she'd passed days before. We had our teeth removed and our arms made useless so all we could do was stand and eat the slop with our faces. We stood the long day round. Our bodies grew fat and our legs weak and we collapsed on each other. We gave birth over and over again.

In the last days, the giddy, heady urge to birth slowed and then stopped and we shed hair instead. It fell down through the top cells and covered those below. To punish us they stopped the food and turned out the lights and we were plunged into winter. During that time we told each other things. One said the children we made were sent to war in two armies—'roasters' and 'broilers'. None of them ever returned.

'We're lucky to see the long day,' she said and we stood straighter, those that could, and appreciated our little space and our worn faces and feet and the feel of another's body up against ours.

Others said, no, the children were taken and raised as guards.

'If they're guards then why don't they help us?' we asked. We could just make them out through the dim. Watched as they moved past on legs like the bars of a giant cage, checking for children. We wondered if they were our sons. We starved that winter, some died, and then finally someone gave birth and set us all off again.

The lights were turned on and the summer regained and those that had survived were rewarded with food. But we were different. One of us edged forward to eat and heard her brittle legs tremble and crack. She lay on the bars with sisters below and sisters above and called out. The din of us was terrific. We all spoke at once, in small sharp phrases:

'She ate more than me.'

‘She stepped on me once and said sorry.’

‘She’s too old to have children.’

‘She laughs when I do.’

She lay there and heard our voices flying over her like a great fleet of cages. One of us fell on her, the nothing weight of her raw skin pressed until there wasn’t much breath left. But she was still alive.

A guard came and opened the cell with his cage hands and grabbed her by the legs. She was carried upside down along the hall. As she passed we called out, ‘Don’t go, don’t go; go, go, go.’ We were never sure. The guard carried her beyond the lights and dusk came suddenly, then it was pitch. She was thrown into it and for a moment she was flying. She stretched her useless arms for the first time and caught the air; then she came down. Her landing was sharp and wet. She smelled the sweet smell of herself rotting over and over again. She realised that she was lying on broken bones and there was nothing, nothing! between standing and death. There was no mother, no guards, no sisters, no cells, no skin, no food, no words, no birth – just the light and then the darkness. It fell all over her and sucked her back from life.

‘The summer just starts again,’ she told us. She wanted us to know what that was like, to be pulled back into the womb. Like all this time she’d been something spilled and now every cell found the other, reminisced, reformed. She wondered if, when she was born, it would be as a roaster or a broiler, whether it would be the same life she’d just lived, to the same mother, or would she be a guard, or something other? But she asked these questions very quietly, and from far away, so we couldn’t hear her. The guards had brought someone new to the cell and we were already calling that one sister. Far away in the darkness she felt herself becoming small. Encased in warm weather. Liquefied. The heartbeat of home.