

Sisters of Mercy

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The surgeon came into the O.R. chewing gum. This was how we knew there'd be a problem. It wasn't the gum but what it was meant to disguise. We're not talking bad breath.

The patient was shaved, supine, out. His wife was in the plastic chair in the hall gripping the handle of her pocketbook. He's the best in the business, we assured her. Why don't you go home and wait there? Much more comfortable, your own living room, you could rent a movie, read a book. A tough bird, South Boston, she said she'd stay here thank you very much. You didn't leave your husband of forty-two years with a brain hemorrhage to go home and watch *Law & Order*.

Gloved, gowned, masked; we dressed him. A star in medical school. No rich parents putting him through. He was one of us. West Roxbury, Roslindale, Revere. Like the man on the table. Like all our brothers. He'd gone to school with our cousins, his parents went to Saint Anne's with ours, at sixteen he got into trouble for setting off Roman candles at Wollaston Beach. Girls like us have always been there to keep him in line. Mothers did it too. Aunts.

A twinkle in those baby blues as he winked at us—always a looker, which explained the three divorces—then turned his attention to the sufferer on the table. We'd all loved boys like him once, though they ignored us and went for the fast beauties, the bottle blondes with thick eyeliner and white lipstick who later landed real prizes and live in baronial splendor in Chestnut Hill with out-of-towners who made it in real estate and want them to work on the accent. Eliza Doolittles. They come in here and we know them beneath the designer jeans and corrected pronunciation. Sometimes they weep and want us to clasp them to our pastel bosoms and talk about the old neighborhood.

He's got the gleaming blade in his hand. God have mercy, we mutter under our breaths, as the boy genius peers down from his place at the head of the table, wielding the tiny saw like a father at Thanksgiving. We're saying Grace, we always do, because humans are fallible, some more fallible than others.

The hand begins to lower. Abraham at the altar, though where is the ram? One of us gently touches his wrist as another points to the thick black X made with a Sharpie an hour ago on the other side of the skull and murmurs *Over there, Doctor, not here*. He pauses, stops chewing, the faint scent behind the mask unmistakable, and glances up at us, only his ocean eyes showing, beseeching—*it was just this once, just today, I promise, please*—his sisters by proxy, we've been saving boys like him our whole lives. A barely perceptible nod as he shifts position, his jaw still, lowers the knife—steady as the best of them—and begins.