

Beyond the Blind

By Cait Atherton

The aircraft's drag lingers in her muscles, clawing her back over dream-weary continents. In the middle of the night, Maria's eyes had opened suddenly, searching, blinded by darkness. In the slow-baking heat of her bedroom, forty stories high, her memories were melting, losing their edges, trickling away. The sky had pressed down, clenched with unshed rain. She turned her face to the pillow. Her mother's ring, on its chain around her neck, bit hard into her clavicle. At least that pain was familiar.

Now morning sun razors through white muslin curtains. Pulling the sheet over her eyes, she remembers how Bangkok dazzles her awake. A rude and chaotic place. Her breath recycles aeroplane food; unwashed skin; the excretions of others. Her nightdress, a size too small, is glued into a tight twist. She unbuttons it slowly.

Unasked, her Thai stepmother has redecorated her white box of a room whilst she was away. The marble floor tiles have been buffed, the walls painted, the wardrobe mirrors lining each side of the room polished to pitiless perfection. She frowns. What had happened to her Dr Who poster, the plastic fairy lights she'd sellotaped above the bed, the small parade of fifteenth birthday cards on her desk? She pulls open the drawers. All emptied and scoured clean, just a few schoolbooks left. She thumps the bed with her fist, pulls off the damp nightdress and kicks it towards the balcony.

Standing, she bends. The diamond ring swings on its chain, blazing in the mirrors. She tugs a brush her through her hair, too dark to be blonde, too fair to be

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brown, pulling mercilessly through the sweat-tangled knots. She's careful not to look sideways at her body. Her step-brother taunts that she is *plā khaao*, white as fish flesh. Over the past year or more, familiar hard angles have become slapped with soft clay; sharp hip bones blunted by pads of flesh, tummy more rounded. And when she examines them, as the doctors tell her she must, her breasts have alarming new weight.

Her body forges ahead, becoming adult without her permission. Would her mother even recognise her now? Grief rises to merge with the ghostly reverse motion of the aircraft. An inexorable tug back towards childhood, to everything she loves. Straightening up, she presses the ring hard, swipes a tear from under her eyes and twists her hair up into a painfully taut ponytail.

As she parts the curtain, shock locks her breath. Gone. The lollipop palms in the park far below, the shoals of birds that swim through them towards the glittering eaves of the local temple, the distant stalks of buildings and the stacks of containers in the docks, tied by a dirty ribbon of silver river ... all vanished.

Instead, just a room's width away across a plummeting chasm, are dank concrete walls. Brutal-edged floors, barricades of ripped sacks, bundles of steel poles with lacerating, sharp tips. A staircase is moulded into the side wall, its lowest step falling to vertiginous nowhere.

He's not much older than her, leaning against a huge-girthed concrete column which sheets to the ground, forty floors below. A red bandana holds back shoulder-length black hair. Even without her glasses, she can see his pepsi-cola t-shirt is slashed across the chest, low-buckled jeans crusty with dried concrete, feet in street-market flip-flops. Between him and the edge is a knee-high string of small red flags. A hard-hat lolls ignored on a steel spike. Arms folded, his toes curl over the drop.

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His head tilts – as if appreciating a work of art.

With a shoot of shame she buckles, one hand across her chest, one tugging at the curtain.

He grins and clasps a hand over his heart.

“Get some blinds sorted,” Maria’s father is saying to his wife over the breakfast table.

“I don’t like them seeing what we’ve got.” Maria looks down from the top of the penthouse’s spiral staircase. The buttons on last term’s school blouse strain, she adjusts her tie. As she descends, her glasses slide down her nose. Only a year ago she could see down to the ponds in the garden from here, little glintings as she turned, way, way below. She hopes they saved the turtles before the concrete was poured.

Maria’s father sits opposite his wife at the huge glass table, his head behind a newspaper barricade. Her stepmother has her back to the lofty two-floor window; hair gathered to one side, glossy in the way the blackest coal has a sheen. Next to her the dark-lashed baby rocks in her high chair. Maria’s stepmother wears the cerise silk robe that her father bought for her in Hanoi. It has slipped off one shoulder, revealing the dark inner J-shaped crease of a perfectly formed breast. Glancing up at Maria, she covers herself and reties her belt.

A rusty container swings behind her stepmother’s back, centimetres from grazing the windowpane. It arcs into the building site, muddy hands reach out to guide it in. There are yells and a whoop as it drops into place, shedding chains. Maria’s father jabs his butter-smearred knife towards the window. “Bloody condo’s going up like the clappers. Don’t tell me it’s legal, jammed that close to us. Somebody’s taken a back-hander, that’s for sure.”

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Breathing in, Maria edges around the table, ignoring her usual seat facing the window. She slides down next to her stepmother. The maid enters, balancing a tray of juice, fruit and cereal. Maria knows she'll be expecting a greeting after the long summer break. She hunches her back against the window, stares at her plate. The maid tuts. Holding the spoon at the baby's mouth, Maria's stepmother turns, quizzical.

"Jet-lag?" She peers at Maria. Maria shrugs and forks up a slice of *som-oh* and drops it on her plate. Without taking his eyes off his newspaper, her father raises his coffee cup for a refill.

Maria's six year-old half-brother bumps down the staircase on his bottom. He howls.

"She's taken my place!"

Maria glances at their father. She takes a small bite and the tart *som-oh* floods her mouth. Her step-brother howls louder. "She's taken my place!" Maria lifts a croissant and crumbles a corner. She glances at her father, of course he cannot see the irony. She swallows the juice, it spreads through her veins like poison. With one hand pressing the ring deep into its hidden cleft, she moistens a forefinger and dabs the flakes into the word HATE.

Maria's father lowers his newspaper. She stirs the word away. He looks irritated, about to tell her to move, but then another huge container swings into view. Her step-brother flops down, mesmerized. "Wow!"

"Bloody nuisance," says her father, as his newspaper slices through the air and lands on the over-sized pistachio leather sofa behind. "We're not paying through the nose for this!" He rises, tucking his shirt into his trousers. "Speak to the condo manager. Tell him straight. Blinds or we leave."

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His wife nods, pinching together the lapels of her robe as she turns towards the building site. She begins a reply, but he has already left the room. She smiles at Maria instead. ”*Sia jai*. Sorry for them. Dangerous. Can fall.”

At three minutes to seven, Maria stuffs her laptop into her rucksack and hoists it onto her shoulder. Then she pauses. She darts to the laundry room where her suitcase lies open, already emptied by the maid. After a moment’s panic, under the used toiletries, tampon wrappers and hair-glued sweets, she finds the postcard, creased and lying in the bin. She smooths it out against her leg.

The chrome and mirrored lift drops through the floors. Her half-brother waggles his tennis racquet, wafting air, trying to lift her skirt; she leans her blazing cheek against the cool glass. It leaves a mark like a greasy kiss. Her heels tick quickly across the flower-filled lobby and she hangs her head as the doorman salutes.

When the doors open it is like walking into the blast and roar of a hairdryer. All around machinery grinds and clangs. The new structure blots out the sky, a concrete skeleton, crawling with colonising ants. Near where the school minibus has parked, three workers extract mud from the ground. The huge syringe-like pump has overflowed and coated them so they look like soldiers in the trenches. They stare back, dripping and stinking. Wrinkling her nose, the bus monitor slides the vehicle door open.

In the minibus the younger kids are like balloons, pumped up and let go of, excited to be seeing each other after the long break. They provoke in each other yelps of envy and worship, holding up new laptops, iPads, iPhones. Maria folds her legs, yoga style, on the back seat and closes the pleated grey curtains that cover the side window. She doesn’t want to look today. She’s seen them many times before, the construction workers crammed into their cage-like trucks. A few sit on the cab roof

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and others hang off the steps at the back – dare-devils or just desperate? And why hadn't she realised before? They remind her of animals being taken to an abattoir.

She scrabbles in her rucksack and brings out the postcard. She takes a photo of it with her iPhone. She must never forget. She had flopped into a sand dune on the Suffolk estuary sands just a few days ago, cheeks blistered by the briny wind, gazing. A stern pebble-faced tower, the only remaining remnant of a much larger fortification, now beached in time on the shingle.

It had been a long damp summer in her grandmother's soot-settled cottage: rain, sea and marsh seeping up the flint walls, moistening bedclothes, mouldering the pages of books. Slowly the roses had dropped all their white petals. Her grandmother had filled every meal with chatter, but occasionally grief had ambushed her and she had fallen into silences, forgetting how a sentence should end. She had been pleased that Maria still wore the ring around her neck after five years. "Never take it off love," her grandmother had told her on the morning of her mother's funeral, closing the clasp around Maria's young neck. "That's what eternity means."

Each Sunday after church, she and her grandmother had tended the grave. They snipped back the ivy, pushed chrysanthemum stems into the gun-grey metal holes and nipped weeds from between the marble chips. Even as the rain riddled down her back she was grateful not to be holidaying in Bali with her father's new family. She imagined their tans enriching from toffee to molasses, ducking and splashing each other in the villa's pool.

Students pour into the first assembly of the new term in their tens, then their hundreds, and by the time they've finished there's a thousand packed in, the hum of renewing allegiances rising across the auditorium. Everyone else has someone they are excited

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to see, or someone who is excited to see them. Maria pretend-waves at an imaginary friend; then feels even more startlingly alone. After standing for the King's Anthem and lighting a candle in front of his gilt-framed portrait, the teachers enthuse about the privileged life at this World Class International School, how diligently students must work to do well in their exams, what bright futures lie ahead. Maria closes her eyes and sways. She puts her hand to her chest and presses hard on the diamond, forcing herself to breathe.

In the lunch queue the popular girls hug and kiss, squealing over each other's escalating revelations. Each year they look more like super-models, their waistbands folded over to raise the curtain on ever-longer legs: the Asian girls' hair high-lighted with red tints, the *farangs'* streaked with gold and blonde. Some have already had their sixteenth birthday-present surgery; eye-widening for the Asians and nose jobs for the *farang*. They bob their heads over Maria's shoulders, when necessary gently easing her out of their way. Maria is grateful that stubby little Posy from Singapore seems stuck beside her. Except when she is eating, Posy is always talking. Like my grandmother, Maria thinks, all those words must cover up something quite awful. Jyrki, the startlingly blond Finnish boy whose father owns a boutique airline, presses against her. He is so close, she can smell stale chocolate on his breath. Acne dots his mouth like dribbled ketchup. "The Maldives suck," he says, his breath blowing inside her ear canal. "Boring as hell. Global warming can't come soon enough." Maria pretends to smooth her hair. Leaving a finger blocking her ear canal, she stares at the floor.

After an hour on the oven-breath games field, Maria's brain is about to erupt from her skull like a soufflé. She says she has a headache and she is sent to the medical room, but when the nurse picks up the phone to call her father, Maria pleads

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that it is not necessary. Later that afternoon in the art room, she flings paint. A jagged stripe, several punched dots. The colours bleed, the paint runs like tears. “What’s the matter?” asks a teacher, concerned. Maria shrugs and says nothing.

On the way home, the minibus halts as usual where the highway gives way to congested Rama IV Road. The concrete pillars that shoulder the overhead highway quickly reduce in height, sweeping the road down to ground level. This has formed an unintended concrete roof that has been claimed by the homeless. Despite herself, Maria pulls back the curtain just far enough to look. As expected, the traffic-beggars are at work; the barelegged waifs in t-shirts and no underwear that thread through stranded traffic to drag a cloth across a window or push a jasmine garland into a driver’s hands, the kids that tap and stare into the vehicles with professionally pleading eyes and palms raised in a prayerful *wai*. Normally they don’t bother with school minibuses, knowing that the young occupants will just point, laugh and turn their backs, although very occasionally a driver will buy a garland to hang from the dashboard mirror for his own good luck. In their own limousine, with their family driver, her father always orders, “Pretend you can’t see them. Act blind. Looking just encourages the poor sods. More of them sent out tomorrow.” Under the fly-over roof, filthy blankets are flung over cardboard boxes to make a collapsing colony of tents. Maria sees the tiny traffic-beggar pull back a sheet and drop the contents of her palm onto a sleeping man’s stomach.

At the end of the school day, Maria leans on the teak door to the apartment. As it swings open, a fresh shock hits. The site is crawling with dusty workers, most

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bareheaded, some wearing cotton balaclavas against the sun like bank robbers. The thought of him looking peels her skin raw with shame.

Maria's stepmother is nestled into the vast sofa, her hair newly waved. She has a large book of sample swatches in her lap. She smiles.

"Choose a blind?" she asks, as her legs uncurl. The movement is both sensual and childlike, it reminds Maria of Bambi. Maria had watched that film with her parents often when she was a child. But this Bambi sleeps with her father. Maria tugs out her ponytail, letting lank hair drape between them.

The sample book is passed and Maria runs her fingers down the squares of threads. Is he is watching? The flank of her body closest to the window has flames licking it. Her stepmother puts her hand on her arm:

"Don't worry," she says, frowning at the window. "Soon they won't see us."

"I wasn't worrying," replies Maria quickly. "I was thinking about what if they get hurt? Fall?"

Across the chasm, a cement-encrusted mixer rotates its maw. A stout older woman hoists a bag to shoulder height and staggers to funnel in powder. Her head is fogged by cloud. She emerges, corpse-like, coughing.

Maria's stepmother walks to the mirror and plumps her hair. From nowhere, a memory of her doing exactly long ago flashes into Maria's mind.

Her stepmother is looking into the same mirror, but dressed to go out: she wears a short, swinging crimson halter dress with sharp black stilettos, the soles painted a glossy red to match the dress. The younger Maria had been sandwiched between kind but alien strangers, swallowing her sobs, pushing away a plate of food that stings her mouth. She had looked up at this exotic creature, momentarily entranced. But now what she remembers is that behind her stepmother's back, the

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baby's nanny had raised her eyebrows to the maid and the maid had responded with the briefest of knowing nods. Then Maria's father had come downstairs. Maria stretched both arms to him, expecting to be swept up from her misery. His eyes slid past her, unseeing, brightening only at the vision of his new wife. He'd placed a kiss low on her neck. The devastating aloneness of that moment was branded in Maria's body like an electrocution.

After the door had clicked shut on the couple, the nanny and the maid had talked. Young Maria understood no Thai, but she heard repeatedly the words: *Soi Cowboy*. As a child, Maria had imagined her stepmother riding across the desert, gun slung around her slim waist. It seemed unlikely, even then. It would be a couple of years more before she heard the name of that street again, lecherous looks pasted on the faces of the boys in her class as they showed each other pictures on their phones and traded boasts that they had actually peeped in the bars and seen the women perform. Sights that could only be whispered about before they collapsed into giggles.

A black hole had then arisen in her mind, so dark, her thoughts simply skated past. If images came, it was easier not to see them.

"They are poor," her stepmother says slowly now, turning from the mirror to look at the building site. "Not nice work, but they need money."

In the silence that follows, Maria is jolted awake. Her mind is forced open. She sees it all.

Her step-mother blushes.

"What colour he like? Blue? Or gold?"

A concrete cutter squeals like an animal being sawn in two. Another joins in on a lower floor. Maria's step-brother skids to the window, placing both hands on the glass. "Wow. That's cool. Look, those guys are hanging over the edge!"

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“Dad likes gold,” Maria says, shutting the book. “I’m going for a swim.”

On the terrace of floor thirty-three the long oblong pool has rib-trunked potted palms and teak loungers lining one side. There is a waterfall at one end, underwater seats with frothing Jacuzzi jets at the other. The outer edge of the pool is flush with the edge of the building and made of clear glass, water continually spills over the rim to be collected unseen underneath. Maria lies on her back, hair blossoming in the warm water like seaweed, drifting, looking up through the concrete skeleton of the new construction. She rotates in the water until gaps in the structure align, revealing high patches of sky. She can see the workers moving. One looks down at her, pauses, or seems to. She closes her eyes, blocks him out. So much need. People doing awful things for money. Why was such poverty allowed? Why weren’t there laws against it? Yesterday the adult world and its cruelties didn’t seem anything to do with her. But now, as she raises her arm, a film of cement dust clings to her skin.

In her ensuite bathroom Maria showers off the grit. The maid has folded the toilet paper edge to a V; lined up her toiletries and made a high pile of the soft white towels. Her holiday clothes have already been washed, ironed and hung up in her closet, her laptop and today’s homework laid on her desk. From the back of her underwear drawer she pulls out the turquoise silk robe her father gave her. She knows she was an afterthought, he was really shopping for her stepmother, but the fabric slips through her fingers like cool water and draws heat from her cheek. The sandalwood perfume from the shop lingers. It has the bass note of a cello, rich and woody. It makes her feel safe, like her parents’ hugs once had. She pulls her arms through the kimono-style sleeves and knots the belt.

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Sitting on her bed, back to the wall, there is a stutter to her heartbeat. The brand new concrete wall opposite has sprouted bristles of steel. A thicket of bamboo scaffolding branches up from the floor below. Poles have been lashed together with rope, uneven planks laid across them. She slides down the bed, far enough to see without being seen.

He's squatting over a small mat, taller than the others. They pass around foam trays of sloppy noodles, giant crisp packets, plastic bags bulging with cola pierced by straws. Eventually they resume work. He leans over the chasm to grasp steel poles held up from the lower floor, balances them on his bent back, carries them to the far side. The tips almost scrape against her balcony's rails. His body is toned from real work, not from the expensive machines in the air-conditioned gym her father uses. His skin is polished wood. She studies him until she could draw every muscle from memory.

When the sun sinks, floodlights throw grim shadows onto the concrete. He squats alone by the pile of poles next to a serrated circular blade. Dropping one pole at a time into the spinning blade, it bites into the metal. A screaming waterfall of sparks pour over his feet into the chasm. Briefly-lived shoals of diamonds.

Finished, he stands, hands on hips, facing her. She scrambles back into the shadows but without warning he swivels the lamp's beam in her direction. She is electrified at being seen. She tells herself not to be such a child. The light blinds her to him but she can feel him watching. Self-consciously she stretches out. The silk slips off her shoulder. She is aware of her scalp, her toes, her groin. Connecting nerves scorch out new pathways.

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Then the light dips. She blinks and can see him again. Without taking his eyes off her, he steeples his hands in a *wai* and lowers his head. She smiles. Her body courses with a new voltage.

When he has gone, she walks out onto her balcony. The city air is an old sponge, left too long damp, saturated with dust and the spices of the workers' meal. The building site is in darkness, but then she notices a small torch has been lit. A bunch of lotus buds are tied to the spike with a pink ribbon. Their heavy heads, almost open, nod over the precipice. A heart has been chalked on the concrete column, far enough around that only she could possibly see.

Later that night, in a sweating, scudding dream, he stands, toes over the abyss. He waves to her. Beckons? Below, the lights of the city wink like phosphorescent plankton. He leans out to touch her, then he slips, dives. Another image and the bus pulls a wide arc in the forecourt, the children are ordered to keep their eyes averted as they dismount. Disobediently she turns, sees a crooked, splattered body. The construction workers jeer at her, close ranks. She is tugged away by the wide-eyed bus monitor.

Her mother appears. She is taking off her earrings, her bracelet. Maria is puzzled. She mouths at her mother "why?" Raw-eyed, her mother reaches behind her neck and unclasps the gold chain from which the ring is suspended. Both drop into her desiccated palm.

Maria dream-spirals back to the hospital ward in Colchester, she's ten years old and watching her mother erode ... bandages flatten her chest, visible through the thin nightdress. And her father's big hands, freckled from his increasingly frequent business trips to the Far East, hold out his many gifts. Over the months she remembers

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his clumsy fingers studding those earrings into a frail lobes, hanging that bracelet around a blue-veined wrist, clipping that sparkling brooch on her chest. But that final time, and his best gift yet, her mother's fingers were too skeletal for the eternity ring. Lowering his face against the fuzz-haired neck that Maria knew smelt faintly of vomit, he'd threaded the ring through her gold chain instead, fumbling with the clasp. She'd heard her mother whisper "thank you" as she reached out tissue-thin hands; one grasping Maria, the other clutching the air behind her for her generous husband.

When Maria and her step-brother get back from school the next day, he barges in first. She follows and blinks – the room is an underwater treasure chest. A thousand tiny rainbows tremble on every surface. The new blind is a mesh of golden threads, each intersection enclosing a tiny crystal. Maria's stepmother claps her hands. "*Suay mak!* Very beautiful! Agree?"

Maria walks to the window. She places her eye to one of the tiny chinks. She can just make out the construction site, faceless shapes moving. She tries to slide the panel with her hand. It has been welded into a casing, which has been screwed to the corners of the window frame. Her brother howls and kicks the mesh; the rainbows shudder. Her stepmother strokes his hair and calls for the maid to bring him cookies.

Maria takes the stairs two at a time. Workmen have already installed the same blind in her step-brother's room, now they are packing their tools; her room will be next. She puts the ring in her mouth and bites the diamond hard.

When she opens the balcony doors the building opposite is in agony, a cacophony of hammering and sawing from multiple floors. Bending over the rail, she still cannot see him. The stink of welded metal is like singeing blood. She bends

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further, just the thin rail between her and the precipitous drop. Far, far below, a pile is rammed into the ground. The balcony shudders. He must be here somewhere?

The maid is calling -- the workmen are ready. Maria shouts for them to wait. Across the chasm they turn to stare at her, but he is not amongst them. The dusty woman leans over to the floor below and yells, incomprehensible but urgent. Another pile drills into the ground.

She sees the scaffolding sway, then he's hauling himself up. With a jump onto the cement floor he slaps his jeans and leans back against the column. He grins, bringing his hands to a *wai* of greeting. He tilts his head. His appreciation injects her with honey. There is no thought. She tugs the gold chain and it snaps. She hurls the ring, chain trailing, across the abyss.

She wills it to land at his feet. It hovers momentarily, as if that might be possible. Weighted by the chain however, it falls short, a pure chinking sound against the concrete edge. He stoops, clutches, but it bounces down and down, lost to sight. She screams *no*, but he throws himself after it, swinging out precariously. A plank loosens and topples, the dusty woman screams as it plummets.

The maid tugs Maria back into the bedroom. She babbles about how angry Maria's father will be. The balcony door is locked for the last time.

That night Maria wonders if she will ever sleep again. Her mind shuffles the decks of possibility, but the real torture is she'll never know how the cards fall. Hopeful scenes show the ring clasped in his fist – then his fist opening on a gold-shop's counter, filled with a year or more's wages, a new start, a safer life. Another image paints a chance meeting on the street, he recognises the *farang* girl, a grin, even a kiss. But slapped on

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top of happy scenes are grim cards of darker colours: the ring sucked into mud, the bamboo snapping; his body tumbling, crippled, dead, cremated.

She touches her bare throat, bereft.

Deep into the sleepless night she startles to find every surface shimmering with rainbows. She wonders how it is possible to dream whilst awake. Then she realises why the floodlight is blazing in from across the gap.

She stands on her bed, unsteady. She can see nothing through the blind, but the pure colours fill the room with his freedom. She wants the rainbows to clothe her, she stretches out her arms, letting them lie in her palms, stroke light on her body. She turns full circle, laughing: radiant, elevated, whole. She waves in wide arcs, just in case.

She begins to understand. There is more than one way of seeing, just as there is more than one way of being blind.

And the worst type of blindness is not being able to see a future.

Later, the light flashes, once, twice, once again. Then it's doused. The sky relaxes its fist and the rain pours.

He has gone. But the backwards drag of grief has departed with him. She listens to the multiple glassy streams coursing down the building. The effort it has taken the sky to hold the rain is released. She touches her neck. Where the ring lay, there is a firm pulse. What her mother really gave her runs free in her veins, can never be taken away. The doctors told her to check herself regularly, and she will. But spreading star-like across the bed, she lets tentative fingers welcome her body's many changes. The forward thrust of a life yet to be lived.

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A future she sees through her own eyes.

The rain exhausts itself. She curls up and sleeps like a baby.

The End