

It Will Grow Here

Frankie looks down at the second pink line as it appears on the pregnancy test. She presses her back to the stall door, listening to her classmates rush through the halls to their buses. She holds her breath, waiting for the anxiety to unfurl from her chest like a thick black snake. Turning to the gap between the bathroom door and the wall, she watches a girl smear bright red lipstick across each volume of her lips. The girl presses hard, her caramel eyes fixed to her candy apple mouth in the mirror. Frankie's chest begins to burn as her body fights to take a breath. The girl leaves and Frankie takes a deep breath, and the snake immediately wraps itself around her ribs, constricting hard and fast enough to squeeze the air from her lungs. Her diaphragm and the snake fight for control in the small space, and Frankie wraps her shaking hands around the top of the stall, steadyng her body while it trembles. The snake seems to elongate as it climbs her, still holding tight around her chest as it extends up around her neck to block her airway completely. Frankie moves to pull it away, but the pregnancy test clatters across the floor. Frankie bursts from the stall, picks it up and shoves it deep into the trash can, pulling length after length of rough brown paper towels from the dispenser to cover it. The snake retreats back to the pit it emerged from, as if afraid to be caught. Scrubbing her hands clean, Frankie looks up at herself in the mirror, half expecting to see purple bruises curling around her throat. Of course there aren't any, but she touches her bare neck anyway, inspecting it before leaving the bathroom.

The halls are empty except for a few teachers still gathering their belongings to leave. Frankie slips outside, rifling through her backpack for a few quarters to take the city bus home. She doesn't have enough, but the odds of a driver letting her on the bus are higher than her using those quarters to call Roland for help. She isn't ready to tell him or confront his reaction to the fact that she doesn't want it. Can't want it. She keeps herself small on the sidewalk and she can

feel the world spinning beneath her feet, the entire planet lurching through the universe in silence. She wishes the snake would come back and replace this new feeling. It's as if, somewhere on a horizon she can't see, a bowling ball, red and the size of the sun, is rolling toward her. It is dense and unstoppable and oblivion lives in its shadow. The world will not hesitate to forget her and swallow her up, in just the same way it does every other black person with a dream. She knows she can't stop it, but she won't help it along by giving it another brown baby to consume.

The blue bus spits at her as it stops, and she shuffles through her bag "looking" for another quarter before the driver waves her on. She grabs hold of a pole so as not to take a chair from someone who needs it, and lets her body lurch with the bus. Near the back of the bus a woman sits with her daughter standing between her knees. The girl is wearing ballet shoes and a faded pink tulle tutu as her mother, with a wide tooth comb between her lips and small pink rubber bands loaded onto her fingers, deftly braids the girls hair up into a bun. The mother's knees press into the girl like a makeshift seatbelt as the bus rumbles down the street.

Frankie longs for her mother's soft fingertips pressed into her scalp now, massaging the world away for only a moment. Sunday evenings, after dinner, she used to sit on the floor and her mother would hum soft songs as she worked through braiding or twisting her hair for the next morning. Frankie brings her hand to her regularly relaxed, used-to-be curls.

One evening, too long ago now for Frankie to remember how old she was, she looked up at her mother while she braided.

"Lean your head forward."

"I don't like my hair, mama. It's crunchy and ugly." Ada looked down at her daughter with more gentleness in her eyes than had been in them for years.

“Well I do. It’s on you, and I love you.”

“Would you like it if it was on you?” Frankie looked up at her mother, an accusation growing in her young eyes.

“Of course I would. Then I would get to be as beautiful as you are. Come look.” Ada stood and grabbed Frankies hands, brought her to the bathroom and hoisted her up onto her back, hiding Frankie’s face behind hers, letting Frankie’s half-done pile of curls become her own in the mirror. Ada reached back, fluffing the afro and batting her eyes, making Franke giggle quietly. With Frankie still on her back, Ada swayed her hips dramatically as she walked out of the bathroom, addressing Frankie’s father who sat on the couch looking at the newspaper.

“Cecil, sweetie, do you like my new hair-do?” Cecil looked up and smiled, walking to them.

“I love it.” He took Ada’s face in his hands and kissed all around her features, making Frankie laugh again. Her laughter surprised Cecil and he moved Ada’s head aside, looking at Frankie. His eyes widened as he looked between the two of them, but then he took Frankie in his arms and began to kiss all around her face as well, tickling her until she curled up in his arms.

Frankie pulls the yellow bus cord so she can get off, leaving the little ballerina, her mother and the bright warmth of nostalgia on the big blue bus. She walks toward their apartment slowly, frustrated with her inability to remain ignorant to the decision she has to make. It will grow, she thinks, or she can stop it. It’s very simple and somehow, also, not.

The last park in her neighborhood is lined with graffiti. The ground is cheap, rocky cement. That never stops the kids, though, they skin their knees and palms, choosing how and when their blood spills before the choice isn’t theirs anymore. Frankie watches as a father picks

up his small, toddling daughter whose lip bleeds. She screams loud enough for the whole park to glance her way for just a moment before they return to whatever they were doing before.

Frankie thinks about that collective head swivel, that “just enough” amount of attention. Just enough to let you know you exist, never enough for you to know if someone cares. Ada lost sight of Frankie once at this park and called for her loudly enough to get that glance.

Nothing happened to Frankie, but the snake in her chest stirs when she thinks about how her mother reacted. The backs of her arms still burn from Ada’s fingertips digging into them when they found each other, her hard eyes bright with tears. Frankie began to sob as Ada shook her once, fear bubbling up in her voice. She cloaked it in anger,

“You can’t do that! Someone could take you. Do you want to get taken?” It took Frankie a long time to forgive her mother for dragging her away from the park that day, but she can’t imagine she would have acted any differently, especially knowing what she does now.

If Ada had a biography of her life it would be poked through and through with love sized holes. She’s lost more in her life than Frankie’s ever had. The same summer that Frankie got lost in the park, Ada had a miscarriage. Frankie remembers watching Ada lose herself for a time. That was when the silence crept into the crevices of the apartment and cushioned even the creaking of the floorboards. Sometimes Frankie can still feel the silence waiting, clinging to the walls, anticipating the next tragedy that threatens to grind the apartment to dust. Frankie is old enough now to understand her mother’s fear. “Do you want to get taken?” Was not a real question, it was a preparation. Ever since she spoke the phrase Ada has been able to conceal the all encompassing fear that her children will be taken from her. All at once, Ada was forced to accept that her ability to protect her children is fragile, temporary at best, so day after day she relinquished some of that control, and now she clings to them only by a long, distant thread.

Frankie looks down at her midsection, trying to ignore the button of her jeans digging into the space below her bellybutton and the tight band of her bra slicing into her sides. The toddler with the bleeding lip had stopped screaming, but now the snake in Frankies chest is awake again. It expands in it's little pit there. Frankie is fighting hard with this new sensation, and as the snake threatens to bring her to her knees, she spots a dandelion growing in a crack of the concrete. It is small and weak, alone in a rocky field. A few yards away three boys play with a balding basketball, bouncing it hard and high off the sidewalk. Frankie watches their feet, which they seem unaware of, as their court expands closer and closer to the little weed. It will grow there, she thinks, or she can save it. Frankie leans and plucks the flower from the sidewalk, tucking it into a link in the fence and continuing her walk home.

Frankie looks up at the old post office building her family has called home since before she was born. Ada's shadow waddles past the window, thirty-eight weeks of baby piled onto her wire figure like clay. All five of them live up there on the tiny second floor, and Frankie often wonders how they fit. Grandma Ethel doesn't take up much space, and they never did have the money to send her anywhere anyway. Leroy is old enough to move out, then Frankie could move into his makeshift bedroom in the hallway until she went away for school, instead of sleeping next to Grandma Ethel on the pull-out couch.

Frankie flicks through the junk mail and bills as she walks up the stairs to the apartment, looking for anything from the Institute, but she doesn't really expect anything. She puts the bills on the table as Ada eases her body into a hard kitchen chair.

"You'll hear back soon." Frankie doesn't respond to her mother's well-intentioned greeting. The Cleveland Institute of Music is looking for skill, technique, musicianship. Not a black girl with a school supplied violin. As much as she wishes she was more than that, passion

does not make up for prowess. Even then, if somehow she could get in, the baby strapped to her back would prove problematic. Frankie looks at her mother, who sits, eyes closed, her round brown face turned to the ceiling as if the setting sun can shine through her. She looks at the small apartment, filled with three too many people, two too many on the way. The snake wraps around her wrists, making them shake and tremble, and Frankie presses her palms together. The snake slinks down and pools around her ankles, binding them tight, holding her hostage in her own mind.

Leroy stomps his boots at the entrance of the apartment, greeting their mother with a kiss on the cheek, but Frankie's body is still and silent. This is how it will always be. Leroy will come home. Cecil will not. Ethel will sleep in her chair. Ada will let the sun pass through her. This is how it will always feel. Hot and stuffed full, no money to escape with, an entire world to escape from; the ledge of a roof, the kiss of a bullet, the blade of a knife all pleased to make your acquaintance. This is how it will end, here in this silent kitchen. They will be consumed and forgotten. It will grow here, she thinks, or she can spare it. The big rolling bowling ball is pressing on Frankie now, blazing and burning holes through her. The snake holds tight. She cannot turn, she cannot run, she cannot call for help. She closes her eyes, brings her hands to her face, and collapses onto the kitchen floor.

She tugs on each of her fingertips as she walks up to the window where the woman with the scrubs the same color as the lines on the test waits for her name and date of birth. She takes a deep breath before speaking, afraid that her nerves will betray her, and she pats her breast quick and feels the wad of cash from beneath the linoleum bathroom floor. She sits in the uncomfortable chair in between the woman with two children on the outside and the woman with

two children on the inside and she cannot imagine being either of them so she closes her eyes and tries to let herself settle into these final silent moments before the second line goes away. The space between the lines is the space in which her childhood left her, and she tries her hardest not to cry between the two women who have too many more things to think about than she does. When the woman calls her name, she does not know if she can move, but her legs have muscle memorized how to step and her mouth has muscle memorized how to smile and her lungs have not yet forgotten how to breathe so she breathes in and out and follows the pink line lady and wonders if this is the person who will take it from her. There, in the too-white room with the too-bright lights, she changes into the paper gown. She traces the ridges with her fingers, her whole body is small and exposed and the stirrups are waiting for her, so she folds her hands in different ways, over and over again so that when the pink line lady comes back there will be no question about if she wants what she wants.