



Hanging from the Hammer of the Bell (extract)

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I'm not really hungry anyway, so I go to the Oceanic to see the Duchess. The Oceanic used to be a hotel, back when people would come out to the Shoals on vacation, before World War One or something. A couple of retired doctors and three retired nurses live here along with six Swans that might be in nursing homes if they still lived on the mainland. Johnny and Suzie Q call it Stairway to Heaven. It's small for a hotel, but it's the only building in Swan bigger than Mrs Tyburn's house. And it's peaceful; the lawn tilts slowly downwards and the grass recedes until it becomes a thick forehead of beach. Some red-bottomed row boats are stacked upside down next to a big coil of rope. It's like a picture; it's really pretty and it feels like I'm not actually here. This is where Lolly died.

Everyone at the Oceanic can get around on their own; they just need someone close, just in case. Except the Duchess. She has Alzheimer's and it's gotten bad. It was already pretty awful when I got here six months ago. She thought I was the daughter of the maid she had when she was a kid. I walked past the porch one day – the Oceanic has this big porch that wraps all the way around three sides of the building, super-broad with lots of rocking chairs, so the Swans can rock and stare at the sea; it's really nice, actually. Anyway, I was walking past and she called out to one of the nurses, “There's my friend. Mabel's little girl. She comes to play with me.” So I came up and sat next to her and let her talk. She asked me questions, too, but she didn't always understand the answers. Sometimes she just smiled and looked out at the waves, sometimes she corrected me. Like when she asked what grade I was in I told her that I didn't go to school anymore, but I should be a senior, but she went, “No, that's not right. You're in the same grade as me, but you go to the negro school.”

And I'm thinking, wow, you're fucking *old*. When people say things like that, not confused things, but words like “negro” as if they were totally innocent and normal, it makes them seem really old. But the Duchess is pretty old, even for a Swan. Anyway, I kind of played along after that. I asked her what her teacher's name was and which girls she played with. And eventually I came up with some really great stuff, like asking her if she had a TV (I even called it a *television set*, really old-fashioned because as far as she was concerned we were the same age, and both of us were, like, ten, and it was 1930-something). And she knew all the answers to everything I asked. She told me how her teacher wore her hair and that she'd wear it the same way when she grew up. She told me about Jimmy O'Malley who would bring a cigarette he'd taken from his mother's purse and smoke it after school. The girls all thought he was disgusting because stealing is a sin and you shouldn't smoke until you're in

high school. I asked what she thought of the moon landing and she giggled and said she thought only boys read space comics.

She makes me want to remember things, which isn't always nice, to be honest, but it feels like the right thing to do. It feels like the only thing I can do for her.

For the first couple of months it was a toss-up whether she'd be happy to see me, she'd smile or do this giggle that made me think of gingerbread, I don't know why. Or she'd be terrified, convinced I'd come to steal things from her. She'd cry and wail, throw things at me until I left. Or she'd ignore me completely.

So I walk up the big stairway that leads up to the porch and the entrance to the Oceanic. It's almost grand, as grand as Shaker buildings can be, I suppose. Lots of space and air and light. The foyer has high ceilings, a wood floor and white walls that make the room seem plain and comforting instead of sterile.

She lives in room sixteen, just at the top of the first flight of stairs. The Duchess hasn't done anything for a long time. She can't eat anymore. She can't move. For a while she'd make sounds, even almost words sometimes. Then she'd move her mouth and shake her head like she was trying to wake herself up from a nightmare. Now she doesn't even do that. She made it clear – back when she could still make things clear – that she didn't want to be kept alive in a “vegetative state” and that this is where she wanted to die. The Swans are having a meeting on Sunday to decide how to kill her. They say I can't come.

Her room is light. They put her bed by the big window but it's not like she can turn her head to enjoy the view. I guess some things we do are to make things easier for the person in pain and other things are to make it easier for the people who love them. They always keep fresh flowers in her room, lilacs today. They're really perfume-y and I start to feel a little bit high.

“Hi. It's me. It's my lunch hour.” Saying things aloud when no one hears you makes everything sound really loud. But it doesn't matter. “It finally stopped raining. It's hot today, hardly any clouds.”

The conversation is hardly flowing. We've both run out of things to say, so I sit in the chair next to her bed, pick up the book I've been reading to her and start where I left off yesterday.

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After I've been here for nearly an hour, I stop reading and look at her, lying in bed, existing. I'm at her deathbed. She's going to die very soon.

The clock on the wall clacks out loudly. The machine that monitors her heart beeps steadily. The machine that breathes for her sucks and drops, a blue accordion in a tube.

She has a heart that works, that bleeps the machine and pulls a line across the screen.

Clack, bleep, suck, drop.

I am her brain. I can't tell her race; her skin is worn brown seasoned. She could be my grandmother. Her cheekbones are the edge of the cliff. Immediately the skin underneath curves in at a dangerous angle, hollows. Too much like a skull. Her eyes are closed. Her mouth open and soundless, letting a draught sweep through the curve of her face.

Clack, bleep, suck, drop.

I am her lost mind.