

## Inessa by Olivia Smith

I forget how to breathe. I look at the women spread sparsely across the room; cross-checking information on forms, heads in hands, rapid bathroom trips, remembering how to breathe. All alone, together.

“Would you like to follow me?” It was a different nurse than before, her accent soft, and faintly Russian. I stand promptly, turning back to collect my things.

“Yes, hi, how are you?.”

“Good love, this way.”

I follow her in a baby duck-like fashion. She leans her body against one of many doors, letting me step in first before enclosing us within. The space, barely big enough for two, could be mistaken for a storage closet if there weren't two doors, one to enter and one to exit. Like a single person deep in a moving crowd of thousands, I can't go back.

“My name's Inessa. I will be assisting in the theatre today.”

Her matured, sultry features extend past her surgical mask. Everything within me fixates on her; as a scared passenger would to a calm flight attendant. She holds gentle and unbroken eye contact, accommodating the stillness between us. I wonder if she can hear my heart palpitations? Probably not.

“Okay,” I reply with forced composure.

“Once you're dressed, place everything in here and knock on the door,” she says signally a previously unnoticed bench that meets my knees, stocked with neatly folded gowns and a stack of wide blue tubs.

“Okay,” I repeat myself. More stillness. Her eyes soften, as though she wants to hug me as I do her. I wonder if she does? It's like she can see my tears below the surface. It's like she wants me to know she understands. Does she? She turns and leaves, just slow enough for me to glimpse people in scrubs on the other side.

I remove each piece of clothing robotically, my eyes locked in space, my mind somewhere else completely; drifting through everything that brought me here. Waking up with a terrified knowing. The wasted coffee I bought on the way to the chemist. The V-neck top I regretted as the wind hit my chest. The internal voice that whispered, 'fuck' over the bathroom sink; a feeling I imagine is like walking in on a cheating lover that you suspected all along, gutted but not surprised. Digging through draws to find my Medicare card. Calling the clinic. Being put on hold. Feeling the most intimate sense of aloneness. “Yes, I'm still here.”

I breathe deeply and knock.

Inessa opens the door and guides me to a lowered bed. An antithesis begins explaining things I don't absorb. The electric bed hums as it slowly draws me back. I look to Inessa. An extended hand. More stillness. More words unsaid. She touches my hair, soothing me like a mother to a nightmare-riddled child.

“This part is the sleepy cocktail,” she whispers.

In a matter of moments, through a flash of surgical lights, and antiseptic aromas, I experience both loss and love, both equally and incredibly human.

I awaken thinking of Inessa.