

"SING . . . SING," SHE mouths. Marlene wants to say *sing to me, my darling children, you have the voices of angels*. The most she can muster are simple charades. To assist her breathing, she sits with knees pulled to her chest and sways in time to her daughters' quiet harmonizing. She follows the outline of thin legs through the sheer material of her pyjamas. *When did I get so skinny?* she thinks. Once she longed to be slimmer, especially after her stomach and hips thickened with each pregnancy. She smiles, remembering her mother's homespun advice: be careful what you wish for.

Now that Marlene grows weaker, her mother enters her thoughts more frequently. Last night she awoke to watch her mother approach the end of the hospital bed. She picked up Marlene's chart, scanned it and nodded her head. Rolf wheezed and twitched in the corner of the room, slumped awkwardly in a reclining chair.

"Mom?" Marlene was tempted to wake Rolf but knew the apparition wouldn't last. None of them did. *It's the drugs, and tricks of the mind*, she told herself. The memory remains while Marlene sways to the music of her children.

*Blue Moon, you saw me standing alone,
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own.*

Her daughters don't watch her as they sing, perched on the edge of the bed. Instead, Kayla, seventeen, twists the hem of Marlene's pyjama sleeve, and Emily, fourteen, looks toward the window. Kayla has already moved onto the verge of adulthood, now even more with her additional responsibilities around the house. Emily is the angry one, incensed that Marlene is abandoning the family. Eye contact with her has grown impossible.

Despite the morphine haze, Marlene knows these are her last days. Today she requests a reduction in the drugs. She wants to see—with clarity—the outline of her daughters' faces, the cornsilk hair she once possessed and the bluish whites of their eyes, although lately red-rimmed.

Until now, Rolf has been her rock as well as her link to the outside world. Today he comes apart and looks worn. He weeps silently in the corner with his sweatshirt bunched around his shoulders, his wide face unshaven and shadowed. Since he's seldom left her room in the last few days—*has it been days or weeks?*

Marlene wonders—he hasn't washed his hair. Restrictions to visiting hours are nonexistent on this ward, and families are never asked to leave. He sways to the *a cappella* of his daughters' voices. Today it is their children who show strength.

Even without the morphine, she feels a veneer of floating marvel despite the building grip of pain with each struggle to inhale. Most people aren't granted the luxury of knowing their end, she realizes. Some are launched harshly from their bodies by errant drivers. The unpaid hydro bill tucked inside a flung purse is forgotten; the fresh pasta planned for supper and the litre of 2% milk for evening cappuccino is splattered curbside; the kids miss their teeth cleaning and the dog foregoes her grooming. Those departures are both untimely and unscheduled. No chance for sweet goodbyes.

Others are seized by fast-acting strokes that enter without knocking, save the quick reduction of vision.

"Ed, something's wrong. I only see . . . half of you," Marlene's mother told her father when the stroke made its rapid assault. One moment she sat on the toilet, flipping through the latest issue of *Chatelaine* and debating between asparagus with avocado or candied yams for Thanksgiving dinner. The next, her vision shut down like an old-fashioned television, slowly reducing to a concluding dot of light. That's all, folks.

The only other time Marlene felt this grip so intensely was on her wedding day when the minister spoke of man not separating what God has joined together. Fat tears rolled down Rolf's cheeks during the ceremony, which happened to be the first time she'd seen him cry. And, of course, on the flawless births of both daughters. Make that three times in total.

The grip is making its full circle and Marlene feels both honoured and conquered by its power. Her fear has changed to acceptance. This recognition is more real than the smiling sad faces of nurses and doctors who, on a daily basis, advise Marlene: "Don't give up hope." Today the chant is useless. Now that she thinks of it, none have mentioned the word "hope" for several weeks. Marlene decides to abandon false optimism so her family can move on with their lives. With the significance of letting go comes a wave of relief. Her mind is clearer than it has been in months, possibly clearer than before her diagnosis.

"It doesn't make sense," Rolf yelled from their kitchen table half a year earlier, "and it's not bloody fair. Old smokers with bad diets get esophageal cancer! It says right here in this booklet. It doesn't say anything about forty-year-old women who drink wheat grass and jog four clicks a day . . . it's not bloody fair." Rolf's voice trailed off. Perhaps the impact of the doctor's news burrowed into his heart.

Perhaps he thought of planning a funeral, of raising two teenage daughters on his own, of living without a partner.

*Blue Moon, you knew just what I was there for,
You heard me saying a pray'r for
Someone I really could care for.*

The purity of the moment makes Marlene smile. Emily stops singing, mistaking the grin for a grimace.

"Mom, are you having trouble breathing? Do you need more medication?" She reaches for the call cord but Marlene is surprisingly quick and catches her daughter's wrist.

"No pain, keep singing," Marlene gestures with her index finger, as in "keep it rolling," before releasing the pressure on Emily's arm. Both girls look stricken, wounded, and Marlene notices how her sickness has made everyone close to her ill. For months, all she has focused on has been her own energy and suffering. And her details. Marlene has left definite instructions concerning what she wants done.

She began to clean house mentally after the initial diagnosis, a diagnosis that should have been strep throat, any curable condition with a few weeks' worth of antibiotics. Or acid reflux, like the doctor at the walk-in clinic first suggested. He must have perused the same Internet site, the site advising innocents that healthy, youngish women rarely get this type of cancer. Instead of grad dress shopping with Kayla, she typed out cryptic notes in bold upper case: DO NOT CREMATE FOR THREE DAYS.

"What the hell is this?" Rolf said when he found the instructions, two clean copies left next to his morning coffee. "How can you be so morbid? Christ, you're acting like it's all over. It's not over yet, damn it." Marlene said nothing but rose from her chair and stood behind him, placing her arms on his shoulders. She rested against him and kissed the visible scalp through his thinning hair that smelled of coconut shampoo.

"The chemo will work, you'll see," he said and took a fast mouthful of black coffee. By the way he clamped his teeth and squeezed his lips, Marlene could tell he had burned his tongue. Considering his wife was about to undergo surgery and then endure the baptism of life-saving poisons, he could hardly complain about a scalded mouth. Nor could he swallow his frustration, or his helplessness, while Marlene stroked his cheek.

"I'm not being morbid, Rolf," she whispered, unable to speak louder than a rasp. "These are my wishes in the event . . . you know. And I've always wanted to

be cremated, even before I got sick.”

Rolf took her hand and felt the noticeable dwindling of her flesh. He hoped she'd stay behind him because at that moment he couldn't bear to see her eyes, eyes collapsing inwards as food became impossible to accept.

“I read it's hard on the soul to be cremated too quickly.”

If Marlene had been healthy and if they'd been planning their wills together, much like couples who plan upcoming holidays and reunions, Rolf might have transformed it into a joke. “Then take off your shoes if it's so hard on your *sole*,” he would say. Marlene would laugh and instantly grasp how foolish her plan sounded when spoken aloud. Her notes would be crumpled into a ball and tossed at the nearest trash can.

That was then, when humour was still a daily player and when separating from the ones she loves was inconceivable. Now she can concentrate on her family. *Amazing, what a hit of reality can do to a person*, she thinks from her flannelette sheets, delivered fresh daily from her daughters.

And then there suddenly appeared before me

The only one my arms will ever hold.

I heard somebody whisper, “Please adore me,”

And when I looked the moon had turned to gold!

Funny, the song they've chosen. It's such an oldie, one more suited to her mother. Marlene would rather listen to disco. She remembers when Rolf bought her a “Super Hits” compilation of Earth, Wind & Fire for one of her birthdays. When he borrowed the CD for his own Discman, she eavesdropped on his off-key singing while he raked the backyard.

Marlene pulled out one of his ear buds and said, “Honey, the words are ‘sing a song, it'll make your day,’ not ‘it'll make *you dead*! You're so silly,” and she kissed his perspiring forehead before reinserting the ear bud.

“Blue Moon” was from Kayla's school play. Marlene can't recall the name of the play, or when the drama club performed it, or much beyond the vague memory of Polaroid pictures Rolf brought back from the production. She had other matters to contend with: nausea, vomiting and vicious mouth sores.

She'll always remember the song because Kayla sang, hummed and whistled it for weeks. No one realized how that song became her daughter's mantra to stay strong while her mother underwent chemo.

“Hair today, gone tomorrow,” Marlene whispered when the girls first saw her turbaned head. She pulled off the wrap and insisted they touch her smooth scalp, as if introducing them to a strange animal. “Have you ever seen such a gorgeous

skull?" she asked, working hard to open her eyes with feigned enthusiasm. Their eyes looked more hollow than Marlene's.

*Blue Moon, now I'm no longer alone
Without a dream in my heart,
Without a love of my own.*

By dying young, Marlene knows she'll stay faultless in the minds of her daughters and husband. *Crazy*, she thinks, *how people transform to saintly proportions after they've died*. Everyone forgets the petty squabbles or annoying traits and remembers only the achievements, the jokes, the laughter. Kayla won't ever bring up how, at sixteen, she yelled "Bitch!" after Marlene called her a slut for coming home late, reeking of pot and covered with purplish bruises on her neck. Instead, they'll speak of the countless joys experienced as a family, focusing on memorable celebrations and trips. One story will feature the ride on Space Mountain at Disney World where Marlene was intimidated by the warning signs directed at those with heart and bladder problems.

"What if I have a bladder problem without knowing?" Marlene said while the four waited in a snaking line. They'd flown to Florida for spring break, using the March birthdays of the girls as an excuse for a vacation.

"You'll know soon enough," Kayla said, followed by the nervous giggles of Emily.

They'll also laugh at how the girls accused each other of letting out high-pitched squeals on the roller coaster until discovering it was their father who screamed. And how they snickered at their tour guide for eye-burning body odour when it was Rolf who reeked.

"Hey, I'm on holidays," was his defence. "I shouldn't have to wear B-O-derant when I'm on holidays."

"Dad, apparently your pits don't know you're on holidays," and Kayla plugged her nose with her fingers.

Emily props a folded note against the phone on the bedside cupboard when she gets up to leave the hospital with Kayla. They promise to return in an hour, after they've changed their clothes and found themselves some supper.

"Can we bring you back anything, Mom?" Kayla asks. Marlene pretends to think about the question for a moment before shaking her head "no." What she's done, instead, is study her daughter, tracing Kayla's heart-shaped face with her eyes. She has to be furtive with her glances or the girls break down and sob. They look for signs to indicate their mother is ready to say goodbye, yet never want the signs to appear. *They'll be a great comfort to each other*, Marlene thinks. *How lucky I've had two children. Two good children.*

Both girls kiss their mother's forehead and walk backwards through the door, blowing kisses that Marlene pretends to catch.

The ivy-bordered note is one from Marlene's stationery drawer. It reads:

*Mom—I'll never be alone because you'll always be
the dream in my heart. Promise you'll try to contact me
like they do on Crossing Over. Remember our code
name Blue Moon. Love Emily*

Ordinarily, Marlene would save a keepsake like this in a special Rubbermaid container. She's kept every card, poem and Mother's Day artwork that flowed from their chubby crayon-wielding fingers. Now it is Rolf's turn.

He watches tears stream down Marlene's cheeks, cheeks covered with invisible kisses. Marlene holds up her hand when he starts to rise from his chair. He stays sitting and watches with a quizzical expression. The note will be a surprise to him as well since Emily has always been a skeptic when it comes to the paranormal, shielding her ears when anyone spoke of supernatural experiences.

"I don't want to hear this," she'd say and stomp toward the door. "You know I get bad dreams when you talk about this stuff. It's way too creepy." Today she is the brave one who admits that Marlene's time is almost up.

Marlene squints and tries to remember her family exactly as they are at this moment. Instead, she notices that Rolf's hair is overdue for a cut. It hasn't been this long and scraggly since they met in university, in their first-year philosophy course. Then she considers the irony of having a phone next to her bed when she can no longer speak.

"Rolf?" she says by tapping on her tray. "I'll have that morphine now," she signals with a make-believe needle held to her arm.

"Blue Moon" music by Richard Rodgers & words by Lorenz Hart, 1934.