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The Memory Keeper's Daughter

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The snow started to fall several hours before her labor began. A few flakes first, in the dull gray late-afternoon sky, and then wind-driven swirls and eddies around the edges of their wide front porch. He stood by her side at the window, watching sharp gusts of snow billow, then swirl and drift to the ground. All around the neighborhood, lights came on, and the naked branches of the trees turned white.

After dinner he built a fire, venturing out into the weather for wood he had piled against the garage the previous autumn. The air was bright and cold against his face, and the snow in the driveway was already halfway to his knees. He gathered logs, shaking off their soft white caps and carrying them inside. The kindling in the iron grate caught fire immediately, and he sat for a time on the hearth, cross-legged, adding logs and watching the flames leap, blue-edged and hypnotic. Outside, snow continued to fall quietly through the darkness, as bright and thick as static in the cones of light cast by the streetlights. By the time he rose and looked out the window, their car had become a soft white hill on the edge of the street. Already his footprints in the driveway had filled and disappeared.

He brushed ashes from his hands and sat on the sofa beside his wife, her feet propped on pillows, her swollen ankles crossed, a copy of Dr. Spock balanced on her belly. Absorbed, she licked her index finger absently each time she turned a page. Her hands were slender, her fingers short and sturdy, and she bit her bottom lip lightly, intently, as she read. Watching her, he felt a surge of love and wonder: that she was his wife, that their baby, due in just three weeks, would soon be born. Their first child, this would be. They had been married just a year.

She looked up, smiling, when he tucked the blanket around her legs.

"You know, I've been wondering what it's like," she said. "Before we're born, I mean. It's too bad we can't remember." She opened her robe and pulled up the sweater she

wore underneath, revealing a belly as round and hard as a melon. She ran her hand across its smooth surface, firelight playing across her skin, casting reddish gold onto her hair. Do you suppose it's like being inside a great lantern? The book says light permeates my skin, that the baby can already see."

"I don't know," he said.

She laughed. "Why not?" she asked. "You're the doctor."

"I'm just an orthopedic surgeon," he reminded her. "I could tell you the ossification pattern for fetal bones, but that's about it." He lifted her foot, both delicate and swollen inside the light blue sock, and began to massage it gently: the powerful tarsal bone of her heel, the metatarsals and the phalanges, hidden beneath skin and densely layered muscles like a fan about to open. Her breathing filled the quiet room, her foot warmed his hands, and he imagined the perfect, secret, symmetry of bones. In pregnancy she seemed to him beautiful but fragile, fine blue veins faintly visible through her pale white skin.

It had been an excellent pregnancy, without medical restrictions. Even so, he had not been able to make love to her for several months. He found himself wanting to protect her instead, to carry her up flights of stairs, to wrap her in blankets, to bring her cups of custard. "I'm not an invalid," she protested each time, laughing. "I'm not some fledgling you discovered on the lawn." Still, she was pleased by his attentions. Sometimes he woke and watched her as she slept: the flutter of her eyelids, the slow even movement of her chest, her outflung hand, small enough that he could enclose it completely with his own.