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"Faika!"

It was too hot to bother answering, she thought. Too hot and too sticky.

She lay spread-eagled on the cool hard floor, getting more stuck to the wood as the minutes inched by. Her sweat was coming off her in waves; no one had thought of putting an air conditioner in the bedrooms. This was a house for guests.

She could feel their movements below, the guests: their footsteps, the deep rumbling of chuckles from her father, the rising, ebbing tide of her mother's voice; the chatter of church ladies, chirpy like crickets. She could feel the humming coming from the heater, the clanging of the boiler from down below, thankfully smothered by the insulation installed yesterday. She knew her mother would get ugly if the house wasn't perfect for the ladies.

She watched a fly crawl across the windowpane, drugged to oblivion by the heady moisture in the air. It was fat, black and furry.

"Faika!"

She was wearing the new white dress that mother had bought for church. Her mother had insisted: she loved to see Faika in white things. It was blindingly white in the sun; blindingly white atop her coffee skin; scarily white when admired, when seen. She might ruin it in front of all those fussy old matrons, with a juice spill, an ink spill, a tear, and then what would they say behind her mother's back?

The fly had gotten itself wedged between the screen and the glass. It was buzzing around and around in desperate, tight, dizzy circles, losing steam fast. She had half a mind to step over and put it out of its misery...

She could hear its angry humming. She could feel the house, and here in the darkness of her room, she could sense her body, too. The rumble deep down in her gut, the cracks and pops of her spine expanding. Her pelvis, too narrow for her age of 15 years: she could peer down without lifting her head and see the two bones, sharp and sticking up. And there was something else, too. Some other inner stirring that she could not name, or did not want to name. It was incredibly small yet. Hardly even noticeable. But it was there, and she had been feeling it grow and move for a couple of months. She knew it well by now—but she was terrified to name it.

The latch on the door rattled. Faika scrambled up and swept a curtain of black, tangled hair away from her face.

When Mrs. Sillman entered the room, all she saw was a sweet little girl in a white dress.

"Faika. *The ladies are waiting to see you.*" Her mother raised an eyebrow threateningly. "So please do not pretend you are deaf and go down there." Those church ladies came every week to the house for a knitting session. They were not the ears she needed right now.

Could she tell her? "Mom—I—"

"Faika, you know how much this means to me. Just come on down and be the star you always are." She planted a kiss on her daughter's forehead.

Faika hesitated. She looked back at the fly. It was hanging vertically on to the window glass by one leg. She looked back at her mom. She looked at her mom's pregnant stomach.

"...Okay." She's just have to save what she'd felt for later.

"She's such a sweet girl, Sarah."

"She'll teach your little one on the way to be just as good."

They all crowded around her on the sofa, clicking their knitting needles around and gossiping like robins. She sipped a glass of pink lemonade and let their incessant chattering spill over her, so that she could block their dowdy discussions out.

"Now, we're just so glad that there are caring, maternal women like you in the world, Mrs. Sillman," Mrs. Grace, the matriarch, a lady with dyed red hair said, nodding meaningfully around at the listeners.

"And not the *other* kind," Mrs. Draper added. The group became hushed. Even Faika knew why. It was Miss Green. She'd been pregnant. She'd gone to the doctor two months in and came out—unpregnant.

"Simply despicable," a younger woman chimed in, a knitting initiate. The church ladies nodded and smiled approvingly. She collapsed with relief. The rest of them continued.

"I'm ashamed to call women who do that *women*—women who don't value the lives of their babies!" the Mrs. Grace hissed. Everyone nodded vigorously.

"Thank goodness that woman doesn't have daughters—she'd encourage those kinds of mistakes and then give them permission to go and commit murder!"

"I'm just glad they passed a law so that young, reckless girls can't go out and do it on their own—at least their parents can prevent them from making *that* decision!"

"Mrs. Sillman, thank the Lord there are more mothers like *you* in the world. You're raising your daughters just right. There sure won't be any Miss Greens in your family!" Mrs. Grace continued. Mrs. Sillman swelled with pride.

The church lady with the red hair turned on Faika. She tried not to shrink back. "Someday, you'll know the joy and wonder of being a mother. And your own mother will be a fine example to you."

They all chimed in.

"It'll be painful!"

"You'll be alone."

"I remember my first little one... she took hours..."

"But the entire ordeal was worth it. You remember that, Faika, when *you* have a child. All the pain will be worth it once you have that child alive."

Faika struggled to keep her face blank.

"She's too young to know," one woman said, reaching across and patting her affectionately on the cheek.

"Bless her heart, she's still a baby."

"You won't be ready for it for a very long time. Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

They all smiled down at her. They were so *big*. So confident ...so strong. So matronly. So grown-up. They'd all been through this, and look at them now. Panic swelled in her throat. She was not ready to be them yet.

It was becoming harder to sip her lemonade. Her lips were trembling and she couldn't get them to grasp the straw. Why wouldn't any of them notice? Why... wasn't it obvious?

The minutes, the hours, the days, the weeks crept stealthily by. And the young girl turned alone in desperate, tight, dizzy circles with her moving, growing burden.