

From *Blood River* by Chloe Whitehorn

KAREN

I was holding my mother's hand when she died. I was asleep, curled up on a cot beside her hospital bed, asleep and oblivious, but I was holding her hand.

I cling to this detail to keep from spiraling into the darkness when I recall the memory. I woke to a nurse turning off the heart rate monitor. It was late at night, rather, early in the morning. They unhooked the monitor and told me she was gone and that they'd give me a minute with her. My mother had been lying in this bed for a week, fading rapidly til she was just an unconscious frail body in a bed. I'd had the week to adjust to the idea that she was leaving me. She'd been admitted on Sunday and that was the first I'd heard that she was even sick.

She'd hidden it well, mostly because she didn't have a diagnosis. Her doctor, he'd told her it was probably just menopause. Women parts shutting down. That's why she was in pain, that there was nothing he could see that was wrong. She should just take some aspirin. A week. That's more than a lot of people get, with accidents or sudden death, but I hadn't adjusted. No one told me she was dying, they just told me there wasn't anything they could do. But no one said the word. I don't know if I was hoping she'd just get better, somehow. I know when she asked to eat some soup on Tuesday I was so eager to feed her she had to tell me to slow down. And then Wednesday she was asleep. And the last conversation I'd had with her was her hallucinating about me in a boat. And Saturday I fell asleep holding her hand, and she... left me. The nurse had put a towel down next to her head, covering a black stain she thought I might not have noticed. Blood I think. Blood that wasn't there when I had fallen asleep, when my mother was still and unconscious. Blood that might mean she'd woken for a moment before she died. Woken and seen that she wasn't alone. That I was there, holding her hand. When I left the hospital, the parking lot was empty except our car. One car under the street lamp and snow falling gently from the dark sky. I'd never been so alone in my life and the world kept me in a crisp moment of solitude, like time had stopped just so I wouldn't have to move forward in the world alone. But I did. I did have to. No one was there to hold my hand.