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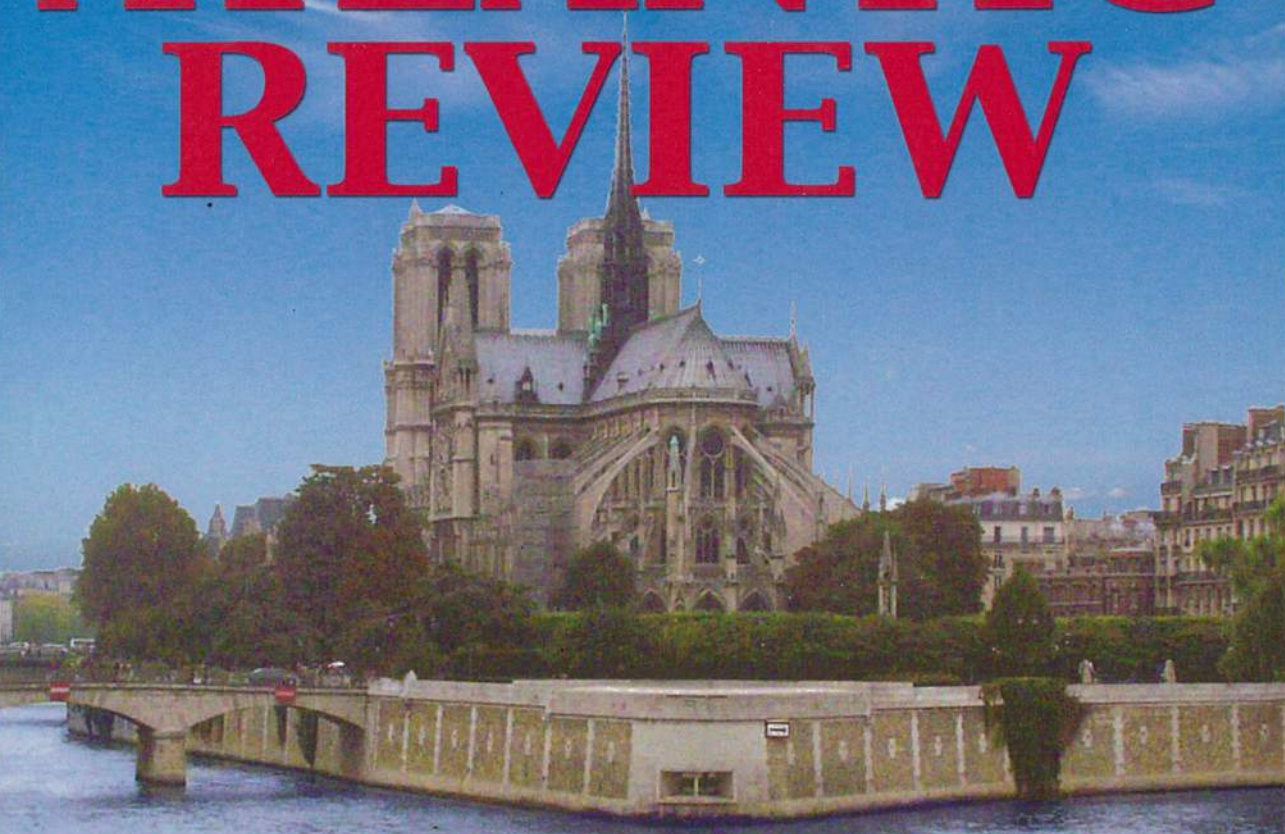

Special Sections

Paris's Virgin Of Peace
Women And Foreign Men
East Hampton's Guild Hall

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The Sick Girl

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When the mother and the sick girl arrive at the pediatrician's office, there are no empty chairs. The waiting room is filled with dozing newborns, heads slack and useless; toddlers, wiping endless streams of snot on their crusty arms; preadolescents with Walkmans glued to their ear-infected heads, the volume pumping the music past the bacterial-coated canals; it's an infectious time of year, no one is safe, not really. This is what the mother of the sick girl thinks, that no place is safe, but perhaps she'll get reassurance from the doctor, the kind doctor who always makes time for her questions, who answers each query slowly as if she was dim, as if all mothers are slow-to-process. This doctor would never call a mother stupid, even though he would want to, would want to shake them, beg these mothers to calm down. The mother of the sick girl comes to his office with the hope that he will convince her that her daughter simply has the common cold or growing pains or a mild case of this or that. Nothing to worry about, she anticipates he will say with such confidence and heroism that the mother of the sick girl, like all mothers before and after her, will smile weakly, eyes tearing and clenched fingers unfurling, with the relief that her baby, sick as she may seem, is really very normally sick, not incurable.

"Who are you?" says the new receptionist, without looking up from her thick paperback, without registering the unusual untidiness of the mother, her hair loose and unbrushed, her shirt untucked from the waistband of her wrinkled trousers, her hands twisting a rubber band around and around her fingers, as she and her daughter lean against the check-in desk. Though the receptionist doesn't realize this,

the mother of the sick girl is clearly not herself.

"I'm the mother of the sick girl. I called earlier today," the mother says.

"Oh," says the receptionist. "Take a seat, it'll be awhile."

The mother of the sick girl scans the room for somewhere to crouch, somewhere to put her daughter, who only a moment ago, had said, I'm fine, and then fell back asleep, sleeping the sleep of the dead, a sleep that the mother knew was not normal exhaustion, but was something else - Chronic Fatigue? Lyme? — something else entirely. Pieces of paper are tacked around the office asking parents with routine issues, such as annual exams, to please be considerate and reschedule after flu season. This flu has become an epidemic, the note says in parentheses, as if that information was an afterthought and nothing to take too seriously. But no one reads the note, anyway. Every flu feels epidemic. No one has the energy anymore to take precautions, to enforce the hand-washing rule after subway-riding or toilet-touching or to make room for the mother and the sick girl with no ostensible symptoms other than run-of-the-mill fatigue. So it takes a few moments for people to register, to see that the mother and her daughter need to rest. A father motions his twin sons to move over. They are playing with their Gameboys. Their eyes are focusing, relaying instant messages to their fingers to press, release, press again and win. They're competitive, aggressive, healthy boys, who ignore their father and continue to play. The mother of the sick girl, watching the boys' muscle control and mental alacrity, wonders why they are here at all.

"Croup," the father says. "Just wait until one of them gets going. You probably don't want to be near us anyway." He mimics a seal bark and then laughs as if the whole ordeal of going to the doctor, getting the prescription cough syrup, hearing the details of air tubes closing, imagining the tragedy of death by croup, was routine.

"What's she got?"

"We're not sure," the mother of the sick girl says. It's the first time she's had to publicize her ignorance, to admit that she knows nothing and the sound of her words are as uncertain as she is. Her voice is timid and quiet, not bold like it was in the ER the time her

eldest son had been vomiting for days and needed an IV. The scene was dramatic then: the skinny boy, the chapped lips, the violence of her son's stomach contracting and expelling bile. Her pediatrician praised her swiftness. She wonders now if she's lost her knack at detecting real illness. As she watches the father of the twins scan her daughter's face, searching for clues and then shrugging, she feels mildly reassured that she hasn't missed something obvious.

The twin boys won't budge and their father doesn't make them nor does he himself offer his chair. In fact, no one relinquishes a seat for the mother and her seven-year old daughter who actually looks older now with her white pallor and limp body. No one wants to acknowledge the neediness that these two suggest: the vulnerability of illness, the burden of parental love, the nagging possibility of something more troubling, rarer than the ordinary and more commonplace bugs like the croup and the flu. In fact, these parents and caregivers are frightened of this sick girl; they don't want to get her disease and who can blame them? They see it, the mother of the sick girl senses. Eyebrows furrow on the heads of know-it-all mothers and this croup father. Everyone looks stumped. They sit in their chairs and watch the mother drag her sleeping girl across the mildly stained wall-to-wall carpeting, past the overgrown ficus plant, the wooden train tracks that make only a soft crunch when the mother of the sick girl steps on them. I'm sorry, she says as she knocks a woman's arm, I'm sorry.

Finally, she is sitting and, quietly, the mother of the sick girl begins talking to herself. It's the flu, she decides, or perhaps mononucleosis, how does that one start, anyway, she tries to remember the literature she's read. Isn't that the teen kissing disease? But it can't be ruled out. Bodily secretions are everywhere, who can control them? Small fingers journey from mouth to eye to anus without warning, without thinking. Everyone tries to stop the germs from copulating, from spawning inbred germ babies, weaker variations of the same virus that get stronger over time, so strong that medicine no longer helps, medicine is laughed at by these germ children. The mother of the sick girl watches her daughter sleep and checks her forehead for a fever. Everything begins with a fever, she remembers the doctor's pro-

nouncement when she rushed her middle child to the ER on a camping trip out west. That time, she had been admonished for her vigilance and decision to act. He had growing pains in both legs and his left arm. Nothing to seek medical advice over, the resident had told her. If there's no fever, just let him grow.

"Sometimes they need to sleep it off," the father of the twins says to her as he walks into the examining room. "I'm sure it's nothing."

The mother props her daughter against a chair to cross the room, past the parents on cell phones and their sneezing children, past the ficus tree and its film of viruses sucking the life out of its roots. "Perhaps I should go to the ER," she says to the receptionist. The girl squirts mayonnaise onto her pumpernickel bread and says, "It'll be a longer wait there."

The mother of the sick girl walks back to her daughter and sits. The spittle between the sick girl's lips forms bubbles which pop rhythmically upon exhalation. The girl's backpack hangs from one arm, full and useless. The bright-colored stripes of her shirt mock her lethargy, she is dressed for an active day, the mother thinks as she watches her daughter breathe, her child's small, but relentless heart pumping oxygen and blood in a tireless cadence. The mother listens to the receptionist who responds to everyone's inquiry, everyone's worry, with the same nonchalant I understand, take a seat. And isn't that her job to understand and do nothing? To sit on the rolling chair and move from file to phone to insurance form to paperback novel with the agility of a gymnast, to calm down but not prescribe, to act somewhat, but not overly concerned, to not make diagnoses that only the doctor is licensed to offer? This young receptionist with no children is not supposed to understand what it's like to have a child who normally complains of hunger so routinely that the mother of the sick child intermittently contemplates ringworm, but only jokingly because a big appetite is the surest sign of vibrancy, of growth, of strength. Yet the mother of the sick girl looks at the receptionist and longs for eye contact, a small nod of comprehension, of assurance that she has done the right thing, this mother of the sick girl, by rushing down to the doctor's office, even though, the mother has already rationalized, a

sudden, almost involuntary need to sleep could be something minor, like simple fatigue. But it is not simple, the mother knows as her daughter settles into her lap, leaning against her mother's clavicle and ribs before settling like cement. The sick girl doesn't squirm, doesn't shift, doesn't follow the conversations around her, but sleeps endlessly.

Then suddenly, the sick girl becomes restless. Her mother begins reciting a detective story that she has memorized, the plot twists, the suspense, are all borrowed from stories which the sick girl, when well, reads aloud to the mother.

"The lights hurt my eyes," the girl says.

"So it's your eyes," her mother says, relieved that it's something specific. "Now we can tell the doctor what it is."

"It was just the light, not my eyes," says the girl.

"Are you sure?" The mother asks.

"Yes, I'm positive, my eyes don't hurt at all." Then the sick girl falls asleep again.

"My son's lost his voice," says a mother with a fur coat.

"That's too bad," says the mother of the sick girl.

"Well?" says the mother with the fur.

The mother with the sick girl looks at the other mother, clueless. Her daughter's weight has put her thighs to sleep. This is a feeling that normally drives her mad, but today, it calms her, this tingling, it gives her something other than her lump of a daughter to think about. They have been waiting for two hours.

"Well?" says the mother with the fur. "What's wrong with yours?"

"I'm not sure," says the mother of the sick girl. "Nothing specific. She's just not herself." Her daughter's eyes open and stare straight ahead, as if she is a fish, sleeping with her gaze focused on nothing particular.

"Could be the stomach thing," the mother with the fur says.

"I guess it could be," the mother of the sick girl says.

"But my stomach doesn't hurt," says the girl, awake again now.

"Could be anything," says the mother with the fur. "Get her tested for everything."

This is the time when modern medicine will most likely fail, the mother of the sick girl thinks, when tests will reveal nothing, when sticks inserted into cups of pee will tell the doctors nothing more than what she has been insisting upon since the morning, that something is wrong with her child. Granted, she has nothing more than a hunch, a judgment call that has propelled her like a bullet to the office of her pediatrician who is, figuratively, out of his mind with children's illnesses. He wants to talk to the mother of the sick girl, but with no mucous or rash or throat full of pustules, no tangible ailment to diagnose, what use is he to her, this mother? He has no choice but to leave them in the waiting room, mother and daughter, to fight their way to him. And the mother of the sick girl is trying to fight. She's constantly searching for a pattern of behavior which will get her past the receptionist: coughs that are short and dry followed by silence; wheezy inhalations that would make anyone nearby want to cover the child's mouth with their own mouth and push air past the trachea, those little hairy suffocators that become as brittle as dried pasta; stomachs that reject anything solid so that by dinnertime even drinking is too laborious for the child to consider. But this mother has nothing, no coughs, no watery eyes, only a feeling and yet isn't this how cancer starts? MS, Cerebral Palsy, the big diseases that have small beginnings and no real cures. They start with vague uncertainty and I've got that, the mother tries to tell the receptionist, but the receptionist bats her away like a mosquito, a picnic nuisance, spoiling an otherwise pleasant day.

So the mother and the sick girl wait next to the mother with the fur who has managed to get her boy into the doctor first. This mother with the fur has the litigation skills the sick girl's mother lacks, the sharp tongue which frightens the receptionist into putting down her book and looking up when this mother with the fur says, "My son is going downhill rapidly."

The sick girl wakes up. "Where are we?" she asks her mother.

"At the doctor's, remember?" The mother says, but the girl is asleep, the waking a mere aberrance, a mistake in her sick REM cycle, a moment of consciousness that wasn't supposed to happen, and in that moment, that brief stirring and registering, in which the mother

felt her daughter's thighs tighten and engage, the neurons in the brain signaling a call to arms, a wellness-about-to-happen, a snap-out-of-it command journeying down the girl's spine to the coccyx and legs, the mother of the sick girl has hope. But there is none now as the girl slackens. She is sleeping without movement, a rest that would normally make the mother feel content, as if she had done everything right in the world, had orchestrated a day in which her daughter had exercised enough, ate well and now was sleeping the sleep of the healthy, however the mother of the sick girl knows that something is horribly wrong. She sings a song, this one about boats. She smiles at a man across the room whose baby has Downs Syndrome. She says goodbye to the father and his feisty twins. She watches a small boy build a block tower, pausing intermittently to stare vacantly, feverishly at his mother. She envies the mother of the fevered boy. A fever! Motrin! A cough! Robitussin! She waits for her husband to receive her meandering telephone message and, confused by its rambling and constant mention of the words Daughter and I Don't Know, he will call her soon for a translation, for more information. She whispers into her daughter's ear I love you I love you I love you. She closes her eyes and waits for pictures to fill the blackness against her lids. She feels a hand on her shoulder. It's the Doctor. He's running out to get a sandwich, he tells her. How are things, he says. The mother of the sick girl stares at him. She opens her mouth but is too slow. I'll be right back, he says before the mother can get the words out, the vagueness of her visit, the kick-in-the-gut intuition that something is very wrong with her girl, her baby, look at her, the sick girl snoring softly now. "You missed your chance," the mother with the fur says. "I would've jumped him if it was my child."

The mother of the sick girl begins to sweat. She loosens her scarf, she unbuttons her coat, she pushes her daughter forward, jostles her, is almost rough, wake up, she is saying with her soft jabs that are really not so soft, wake up, she commands, but the girl is clearly unconscious, nothing is working, nothing is making her better. There are more people in the waiting room, more children with sicknesses that appear obvious, but really have insidious travel routes through the body to the brain, that bastion of everything worthwhile, that

nexus of everything the mother of the sick girl has been conditioned to protect, to stimulate, to allow to grow like life in a Petri dish. My daughter's brain is dying, the mother of the sick girl suddenly knows like she knows her address, her wedding anniversary, her children's birth weights in chronological order, first, second and this one, her baby, her third.

I need to see him, she is sounding urgent now, a seriousness in her voice that she is unaccustomed to, that is unlike the way she normally likes to be. But this is not normal, she tells the receptionist. It is not normal for my daughter to sleep like this. Maybe you could call the ER and tell them we're coming. She points across the room at the sick girl and when she sees her sleeping, slumped like a passenger on a long tedious journey, she says, Please look at her. The receptionist stands up and looks at the girl and says, She's just tired. Yes, says the mother, but that is not normal, don't you understand? She woke up and dressed herself for school and fell asleep. That is not normal. That is not my child. And suddenly, the mother of the sick girl, is raising her voice. Her words are no longer coming out in short informative sentences, but rather, disjointed moans, pleas, bargains, I'll do anything, she was heard saying, I'll do anything, please, my baby, my baby.

Aunts, grandmothers, care-givers shift uneasily in their seats and one of them, a grandmother who speaks little English, a Lithuanian grandmother with a sick toddler in her strong arms, says with the best grammar she can find, despite the situation which has rattled her, kicked her own mothering instincts into over-drive, this grandmother says to the receptionist, "She go first, she go now." And the mother of the sick girl begins to cry. She didn't feel her tears at first, but the grandmother is saying "No cry now, baby" and wiping the mother's face with a warm tissue and patting the mother's head firmly, but with a camaraderie, a bond of shared nightmares of all kinds of death, in cars, in cribs, on jungle gyms, with baby-sitters, with spouses, at school. The grandmother with the sick toddler still on her shoulder walks the mother of the sick girl back to her daughter and says, "Go on now, go on," and isn't that a universal message, go on, move fast, emergency? The mother of the sick girl realizes that someone else has

confirmed what she alone has known for hours, that her daughter is very sick, deathly sick, though she won't linger on that word, deathly, the word that has drifted in and out of the mother's consciousness since she arrived at the office, the word that she has waged war with, medicated herself against with songs and memories of past incidents and advice from other parents. Deathly has left her mute, stunned, impotent. So, although her ringing cell phone is in her pocket and although she knows it is her husband, who must have finally landed and is retrieving her words that called out to him while he was in flight and spared knowing what the mother has known for so long, though it is her husband calling, she cannot answer him. "I help you," the grandmother says, pulling the sick girl roughly up from her chair. "I help you do it." The mother of the sick girl hears the grandmother and does what the older woman tells her: grabs the sick girl's legs while the grandmother cradles the toddler in the crook of her chin and shoulder and lifts the sick girl's upper body. Together, grandmother and mother, carry the sick girl like a useless hammock into the first examining room. The receptionist tries to block the doorway because she is still not certain that this is the right thing to do, since the sick toddler is the one who arrived at the office first. "We have a protocol," she says. But before the receptionist has time to approve this change-of-events, it is the first examining room that becomes frantic when the doctor returns. The grandmother can't stop talking, in Lithuanian and then English, "I see the girl," she says and then the doctor, searching for something more concrete, less hysterical, turns to the mother of the sick girl who can say nothing more than, "My daughter is sick."

There is a Coke can that falls from the counter to the floor as the doctor reaches for his stethoscope. All of them, grandmother, mother, doctor, are slipping and sticking to the floor as they turn the girl from her back to her front to her back again which is where she stays, sleeping still, though her shirt is untucked, her pants unbuttoned. "I'm not sure," the doctor is talking to himself. "But I think..." And he doesn't finish. "What?" The mother of the sick girl says. "Tell me," the mother says, relieved that there may be a conclusion, a course of action, antibiotics, Benadryl. But the doctor isn't listening.

He has left the examining room and takes the phone away from the receptionist and calls 911. The mother of the sick girl takes the blanket of the sick toddler that the grandmother offers, the one that the sick girl will sleep with for days in the ICU, after she is rushed to the ER in an ambulance, after the receptionist says I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.

By the time her husband returns from San Juan or San Francisco, one of the saints of the Pacific, there are needles inserted into every piece of translucent skin that their daughter has to offer. They cry as the doctor performs tests like divine rituals. They cry as they take turns going home and returning the following day to the sick girl, who awakens briefly, sometimes to smile and other times to just stare at nothing. The mother and her husband OK brain scans because we can't rule anything out, the doctor tells them, not until we find something conclusive. And as test after test shows nothing abnormal, nothing deviant or disruptive to normal cell production, nothing chaotic or provocative, nothing to account for their daughter's sleep and slow, yet persistent heart beat, the mother of the sick girl wonders if it will ever end, the testing and waiting.

But it isn't the doctor or the mother or the husband who decide, it is the sick girl herself who one day wakes up and remains awake. Her heart is being confidently, her cheeks are pink and her eyes are alert. The doctor shakes his head and says, it really was nothing. Whatever she had is gone now. The tests are all normal. She is awake now, your daughter, she is awake and fine. She is fine. It really was nothing.