Don’t Move

Margaret Mazzantini

Chapter 1

You went through the stop sign. You had your imitation wolfskin jacket on, your headset was plugged into your ears, and you never even slowed down. The rain had just stopped, and soon it would start again. The sky was the colour of ashes, and above the branches of the plane trees, above the TV aerials, it was filled with great, twittering, feathery flocks of starlings. They looked like giant blotches, black against the grey of the sky, veering and swerving in tight formations, packed so close that they were touching one another, but harmlessly; and then they would open up and spread apart and almost disappear from sight before coming together again, as densely as before. Down on the ground, the pedestrians were covering their heads with newspapers, even with their bare hands, to protect themselves from the hail of droppings raining down from the sky, sliming the pavement, mingling with wet fallen leaves in viscous clusters, and giving off a heavy sweetish smell everyone was in a hurry to get away from.
You came flying along the avenue, heading for the intersection. You almost made it - the guy in the car almost managed to miss you. But the street was slick with starling guano. The car wheels skidded a little on that slippery surface, not much, but enough to graze your motor scooter. You flew up towards the birds and then down into their shit, and your backpack with all the stickers on it came down with you. Two of your notebooks landed in the gutter, in a puddle of black water. Your helmet, which you'd neglected to fasten, bounced off the street like an empty head. Someone ran over to you right away. Your eyes were open, your face was filthy, you'd lost all your front teeth. Your skin was peppered with asphalt cinders that darkened your cheeks like a man's beard. The music had stopped; your earphones were tangled up in your hair. The man in the car sprang out, leaving the door wide open, and ran to where you were lying. He looked at the big gash in your forehead and reached into his pocket for his mobile phone, but it slipped out of his hand. A boy picked it up - he's the one who reported the accident. Meanwhile, the traffic was at a standstill. The guy's car was where he'd left it, straddling the tram tracks, and the tram couldn't pass. The driver got out, along with a lot of his passengers, and they all walked over to where you were. Total strangers stood in a circle around you and stared. A little groan came out of your mouth, followed by a bubble of pink froth; you were sliding into unconsciousness. All the blocked traffic delayed the ambulance, but you weren't in a hurry any more. You were closed up in your fake-fur jacket like a bird with folded wings.

At last, the emergency team got to you, put you in the ambulance and sped away through the traffic with their sirens wailing. Some cars pulled over to the side of the road to let you pass, but the ambulance driver had to go up on the pavements along the river, and all the while the IV bottle was swinging above your head and a hand was squeezing a big blue bag, again and again, pumping breath into your lungs. In A & E, the doctor who took charge of you slipped her finger into your mouth and

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down between your mandible and your hyoid bone. That's an extremely sensitive pressure point, and your reaction was abnormally weak. She took some gauze and wiped away the blood that was running out of your forehead. She examined your pupils; they were fixed and asymmetrical. And you were bradypnoeic, you were breathing too slowly. They put an artificial airway into your mouth to reposition your tongue, which had slid to the back of your throat, and then they inserted the suction catheter through your nose to clear your airway passages. They pulled up blood, tar, mucus and tooth fragments. They put a pulse oximeter clip on one of your fingers to measure the oxygen saturation of your blood. Your oxyhaemoglobin percentage was eighty-five, dangerously low, and so they intubated you. The doctor slid the blade of the laryngoscope, with its cold light, into your mouth. A nurse came into the room, pushing the trolley with the cardiac monitor, but when she plugged the machine in, it didn't start. She struck the monitor a gentle blow on the side, and the screen lit up. They pushed up your T-shirt and pasted the electrodes on to your chest. The CAT-scan room was in use, so you had to wait a little before they put you into the scanning tunnel. The scan showed that you had a head trauma affecting your temporal lobe. On the other side of the glass window, the emergency physician asked the radiologist to make new, more detailed cross-sections. They revealed the depth and extension of a haematoma outside the cerebral parenchyma. On the opposite side of your skull, the contrecoup haematoma, if there was one, wasn't visible yet. But they didn't inject you with the contrast medium, because they were afraid of renal complications. They quickly called the third floor and had them get the operating theatre ready. The casualty physician asked, 'Who's the neurosurgeon on duty?'

In the meantime, they had started preparing you for surgery. A nurse carefully undressed you, cutting off your clothes with a pair of scissors. No one knew how to notify your family. They were hoping to find some kind of identification on you, but you didn't have any. Then they looked in your backpack and found your diary. The casualty doctor read your first name, then your surname. She stared at it for a few seconds before returning to your first name. All at once she felt hot, her face was burning, she needed to breathe and couldn't; it was as if a stubborn mouthful of food were obstructing her windpipe. She forgot about her sanguinary profession and looked you in the face like an ordinary laywoman. She studied your swollen features, hoping to prove herself wrong, to drive away her awful thought; but you look like me, and Ada couldn't help seeing the resemblance. The nurse was shaving your head; your hair was falling to the floor. Ada gestured at your dark brown locks. 'Careful. Be careful,' she whispered. She went over to the intensive-care unit and spoke to the neurosurgeon on duty. 'That girl, the one they just brought in . . .'

'You don't have a mask on. Let's step out.'

They left that aseptic environment, where relatives aren't allowed, where the patients lie naked and breathe artificially. They went back to the room where the nurse was prepping you. The neurosurgeon looked at the monitor, checking your heart rhythm and your vital signs. 'She's hypotensive,' he said. 'Have you excluded thoracic or abdominal injuries?' Then he gave you a sidelong, furtive look. With a quick movement of his fingers, he opened your eyelids.

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'Well?' Ada asked.

'Are they ready in the operating theatre?' the neurosurgeon asked the nurse.

'Not yet. They'll be ready soon.'

Ada was insistent. 'Don't you think she looks like him?'

The neurosurgeon turned round and held your CAT-scan results up to the light that was coming in the window. 'She's got a subdural haematoma.'

Ada wrung her hands and raised her voice: 'She looks like him, doesn't she?'

'It could be intracranial, as well . . .'

It was raining outside, but Ada took the exterior walkway that led from the emergency wing to the main hospital building. Wearing her short-sleeved tunic, her arms tightly folded, she stepped silently in her green rubber medical clogs. Instead of taking the lift up to the surgery floor, she climbed the stairs. She needed to do something, to keep moving. I've known her for twenty-five years. For a brief time, when I was still single, I used to flirt with her, half seriously, half in jest.

Ada opened the door to the physicians' lounge, where a nurse was clearing away some coffee cups. Ada took a plastic cap and a surgical mask from their containers, hurriedly put them on and entered the operating theatre.

I must have noticed her after a little while, when I shifted my eyes to the nurse to pass her the clamp. I thought it was strange to see Ada there. She works exclusively in intensive care, and our rare encounters generally take place in the snack bar on the basement floor. But I didn't pay any particular attention to her; I didn't even nod a greeting. I removed another clamp and passed it to the nurse. Ada waited until my hands were away from the operating field. Then she whispered, 'Doctor, you must come.' The nurse was taking the suturing needle out of its sterile wrapping; I heard her tearing the plasticised paper as I looked up at Ada. She was standing very close to me - I hadn't noticed how close. She wasn't wearing any make-up, and I found myself staring into a pair of naked, tremulous, glittering female eyes. Before she was transferred to A & E, she'd been one of the best anaesthetists on the hospital staff, and she'd pumped nitrous oxide into many a patient of mine. I'd seen her remain calm and unemotional even in the most crucial moments, and I'd always admired her for that, because I knew how much effort it cost her to bury her feelings inside her green hospital tunic.

'Later,' I said.

'No, Doctor, it's urgent. Please come.'

Her voice sounded different, filled with a strangely intense authority. I believe my mind remained blank - I suspected nothing - but my hands suddenly felt heavy. The nurse presented the needle holder. I'd never left an operation unfinished. I closed my

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hand, realising as I did so that I was reacting too slowly. I started sewing the abdominal wall back together, but then I took a step backwards, trying to put some distance between myself and the patient, and I collided with someone standing behind me. 'You finish up,' I told the surgical registrar. The nurse passed him the needle holder. The metal instrument struck his gloved hand with a dull slap that sounded amplified in my ears. Everyone in the room looked at Ada.

Behind our backs, the door of the operating theatre closed silently and firmly. We stood facing each other in the waiting area. 'Well?' I said.

Ada's chest was heaving under her tunic, and her bare arms were blotchy from cold. 'Doctor, we've got a girl with a cranial trauma down in intensive care . . .'

Automatically, almost without noticing it, I stripped off my gloves. 'Go on.'

'I found her diary. Doctor, her last name is the same as yours.'

I raised a hand and removed the surgical mask from her face. Her voice wasn't agitated any more; her courage was at an end, and what remained was a calm, breathless plea for help. 'What's your daughter's name?' she asked.

I think I leaned towards her so that I could see her better, so that I could search her eyes for a name that wasn't yours.

'Angela,' I murmured into those eyes, and I saw them flood with tears.

I ran down the stairs, I ran through the rain outside, I ran past an arriving ambulance that jerked to a dead stop a few feet away from my legs, I ran inside the glass doors of the emergency room, I ran across the nurses' station, I ran into a room where someone with a broken limb was screaming, and I ran into the next room, which was empty and in disorder. That's where I stopped. Your brown hair was on the floor. Your wavy brown hair and some bloodstained gauze, all swept up into a little mound.

In an instant, I'm turned into dust, walking dust. I drag myself to the intensive-care unit and go down the hall to the glass wall. There you are, shaved and intubated, with bright white bandages around your bruised, swollen face. It's you. I enter the room and stand beside you. I'm a father, a poor father like any other, sweaty, dry-mouthed, shattered by grief. My scalp is cold. I can't get my mind around what's happening; it's looming over me, ready to crush me, and I remain in a kind of blurry stupor. My sorrow dazes me, cripples me like an embolus. I close my eyes and reject my sorrow. It's not really you lying there; you're at school. When I open my eyes again, I won't see you. I'll see another girl, any other girl, some ordinary girl in the world. But not you, Angela. I open my eyes and it's really you, some ordinary girl in the world.

There's a box on the floor with DANGEROUS WASTE written on it. I discard a part of myself: the man, not the physician. I must do this. It's my duty; it's the only thing left for me to do. I must look at you as though you're a stranger to me. I move the

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electrode that's rudely touching your nipple to a more seemly position. I look at the monitor: fifty-four heartbeats per minute. But going down: now it's fifty-two. I raise your eyelid. Your pupils are anisocoric. The right one is completely dilated; the intracranial trauma is in that hemisphere. You need immediate surgery so your brain can breathe. The mass of tissue displaced by the haematoma is pressing against the hard, unyielding inner wall of your skull, smothering the centres that control all the nerves in your body, depriving you with every passing instant of a bit more of yourself. I turn to Ada. 'You've given her cortisone?'

'Yes, Doctor. And medication to protect the lining of her GI tract.'

'Does she have other injuries?'

'Possibly a ruptured spleen.'

'Haemoglobin?'

'Twelve.'

'Who's in neurosurgery?'

'Me, I am. Hello, Timoteo.'

Alfredo puts a hand on my shoulder. His white coat is unbuttoned; his hair and face are wet. 'Ada telephoned me. I had just left the hospital.'

Alfredo is the best surgeon in his department, and yet nobody gives him any special consideration. His manner is tentative, his behaviour is frequently off-putting, he has no visible merits; he works in the shadow of the chairman of surgery, who stands around watching while Alfredo wears himself out. Many years ago, I gave him a few words of advice, but he never listened to me; his character's not as highly developed as his surgical skills. He's separated from his wife, and I know he has a teenage son more or less your age. He wasn't on duty, he could have opted out, no surgeon likes operating on a colleague's relative. Nevertheless, he jumped into a taxi and had the driver drop him off in the middle of the traffic outside. He ran through it as fast as he could, darting past the cars in the rain. I'm not sure I would have done the same.

'Is everything ready upstairs?' Alfredo asks.

'Yes,' replies the nurse.

'Let's go up.'

Ada approaches you, takes you off the respirator and hooks you back up to the Ambu bag for your trip to the operating theatre. Then they get you under way. As they're loading you into the lift, I see one of your arms slip off the trolley. Ada leans down, reaching for your hand.

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I stay downstairs with Alfredo. We sit in one of the rooms near the intensive-care unit. Alfredo turns on the transilluminator, puts up your CAT scan, and examines it from a few inches away. At one point, he stops, furrows his brow, gazes more intensely. I know what it means to search the nebula of an X-ray for some helpful clue.

'See here,' he says. 'This is the main haematoma, near the dura mater. I won't have any problem getting to it. We'll have to see how much damage the brain has suffered - that's something I can't predict. Then there's another area here, deeper down. I don't know, maybe it's an effusion caused by the contrecoup . . .'

We exchange glances, standing in the lurid light that projects the image of your brain on to the wall behind us. We know we can't lie to each other. 'Ischaemic complications could have started already,' I whisper.

'I have to open her up; then we'll understand.'

'She's fifteen.'

'That's good. Her heart is strong.'

'She's not strong - she's little.'

My knees buckle, and now I'm crying without restraint, pressing my hands against my wet face. 'She's going to die, isn't she? We both know it. Her head is flooded.'

'We don't know shit, Timoteo.' He goes down on his knees beside me, takes my arm and shakes me hard, shaking himself at the same time. 'We're going to open her up and take a look. I'll aspirate the haematoma, give her brain a chance to breathe, and we'll see what happens.'

He gets to his feet. 'You're going to be in there with me, right?'

Before I stand up, I wipe my nose and my eyes with my forearm. A shiny trail of mucus clings to the hairs. 'No, I don't remember anything about the brain. I wouldn't be any help to you . . .'

Alfredo gives me one of his imperturbable looks. He knows I'm lying.

In the lift, we don't talk; we look up at the illuminated numbers of the floors we're passing. We separate without a word, without even touching each other. I take a few steps and sit down in the doctors' lounge. Alfredo is scrubbing for surgery. In my mind, I follow each of his movements as he goes through a ritual I'm quite familiar with. I see him thrust his arms up to the elbows in the big stainless-steel sink; I watch his hands unwrap the sterilised sponge. I've got the smell of antiseptic in my nose. The nurse passes him the sterile towels so he can dry himself off; the scrub nurse ties his surgical gown . . . It's unusually quiet around here - everyone's been reduced to silence. A nurse, someone I know very well, passes in front of the open door, our eyes meet, and his immediately shift to the floor and his rubber shoes. Now Ada's at

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the door. Ada, who's never been married, who has a ground-floor flat with a garden that her upstairs neighbours' laundry falls into.

'We're starting,' she says. 'Are you sure you don't want to come?'

'Yes.'

'Do you need anything?'

'No.'

She nods and tries to smile.

'Listen, Ada,' I say as she moves away.

She turns towards me again. 'Yes, Doctor?'

'If the worst should happen, ask everyone to leave. Then, before you come to call me, before I see her, disconnect the respirator, remove all the needles and all the tubes, clean up everything, and cover up the - well, just try to give her back some dignity.'

*

Now Alfredo has finished scrubbing, and he enters the operating theatre with his hands in the air. The registrar approaches him and slips on his gloves. You're lying under the theatre lamp. I've got one thing left to do, the most terrible of all: I've got to notify your mother. You remember, she left for London this morning. She was supposed to interview somebody, a Cabinet minister, I think. She was very excited. Her cab drove away from the house just before you left. Earlier, I heard the two of you talking in the bathroom. You came home at 12.15 on Saturday night, fifteen minutes later than the time you'd agreed to, and she was very upset. In certain areas, she's not at all indulgent. She can't stand it when you break the rules; she takes it as a personal attack on her serenity. Generally, though, she's an easy-going mother; when she's inflexible, it's a kind of self-defence, sure, but believe me, it oppresses her, too. I know you're not doing anything wrong. You meet your friends after school and talk in the twilight, in the cold, you pull the sleeves of your sweaters over your hands and shiver under all that graffiti. I've never been strict with you. I trust you; I even trust your mistakes. I know you from the way you are at home and from the rare moments we spend together, but I don't know you as you are with other people. I know you have a good heart, and I know you give it all to your great friendships. And so you should; it's wonderful to have that sparkle in your life. But your mother doesn't see it that way. She thinks you don't study enough, that you waste your energy, and she's afraid you'll fall behind in school.

Sometimes you and your friends walk down the block and descend into that subterranean bar on the corner, that smokefilled underground cavern. I looked down in there once. I was standing outside, peering through the pavement-level windows. I saw you all laughing, kissing one another, stubbing out cigarettes. There I was, an elegant fifty-five-year-old gentleman out for a nocturnal stroll, and there you were,

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sitting on the other side of one of those little grated windows the passing dogs like to mark. You were all so young; you were sitting so close together. And you're all so beautiful, Angela, you and all your friends. Beautiful. I've been meaning to tell you that. I was almost ashamed to be spying on you, watching you all so curiously, like an old man watching a child unwrapping a gift. But so I did, and I saw you down there, unwrapping your life in that smoky bar.

I just spoke to my secretary. She's managed to get word to the people at Heathrow Airport. They'll meet Elsa as soon as she gets off the plane, take her to a private room and explain the situation. It's terrible to think about her sitting up there in the sky with a lapful of newspapers and no clue at all. She thinks we're safe down here, my poor daughter, and I wish her flight would never end - I wish her plane would go round the world indefinitely. Maybe she's looking at a cloud right now, one of those clouds that hide the sun almost but not completely, and a golden beam is passing through the little window and lighting up her face. She's probably reading an article written by some colleague and reviewing it by adjusting the contours of her mouth. I know all her involuntary expressions; it's as if every emotion has a tiny indicator on her face. I've sat next to her on many aeroplane flights. I know the creases in her neck, that little pouch that forms under her chin when she lowers her head to read; I know the fatigue in her eyes when she takes off her glasses and lays her head back against the seat. Now the air steward's offering her a meal on a tray and she's refusing in perfect English and asking for 'Just a black coffee' and waiting for the smell of pre-packaged food to go away. Your mother always has her feet on the ground, even when she's in the air. Now she's probably sitting back with her face turned towards the window; maybe she's pulled down the stiff little shade for her half-hour of rest. She's thinking about all the things she has to do today, and, on top of that, I'm sure she's determined to go into town to buy you something. The last time she came back from a trip, she brought you that great-looking poncho, remember? But no, maybe she won't buy you anything; maybe she's still angry with you . . . What's she going to think when the people from the airline meet her on the ground? Will her knees give way? What will be the look on her face as she stands there in the midst of all that international coming and going? How much terror will be in her eyes? This is going to age her, you know, Angela; this is going to age her a lot. She loves you so much. She's a liberated, highly civilised woman, she's a model of social grace, she's extremely knowledgeable, but she knows nothing about grief. She thinks she knows, but she doesn't. She's up there in the sky, and she doesn't yet know what grief is like down here on earth. It's an atrocious wound, a hole in the heart, and it's sucking in everything at top speed, like a whirlpool: cassettes, clothes, photographs, tampons, marking pens, compact discs, smells, birthdays, nannies, armbands, nappies. Everything's gone. She'll need all her strength in that airport. Maybe she'll run to the window overlooking the runway and fling herself against that transparent wall like an animal swept away in a flood.

My secretary spoke to one of the airport managers, who assured her that they'll proceed with extreme caution; they'll try their best not to alarm your mother too much. Everything's been arranged: she'll be on the next plane home. There's a British Airways flight that leaves London shortly after her arrival. Everything's been arranged: they'll give her a seat in some quiet corner, they'll bring her some tea, they'll offer her a telephone. I've got my mobile in my pocket, turned on and ready

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for her call. I've checked it; it's got good reception and good signal strength. I'm going to lie; I'm going to try to tell her you're not in critical condition. Naturally, she won't believe me, she'll think you're dead. I'm going to be as convincing as I can.

You were wearing a ring on your thumb. I'd never noticed that before. Ada managed to get it off - it's here in my pocket. I try to put it on my own thumb, but the ring's too small. Maybe it'll fit on my middle finger. Ah, don't die, Angela, don't die before your mother's plane lands. Don't let your soul fly up to the clouds she's looking at so calmly. Don't cross her flight path, dearest daughter. Stay where you are. Don't move.

I'm cold. I'm still in my scrubs; maybe I should change. My street clothes are in the metal locker with my name on it. I carefully put my sports jacket on the hanger over my shirt, I left my wallet and my car keys in the upper compartment, and I closed the little padlock. When was that? Only three hours ago, perhaps even less. Three hours ago, I was a man like any other. How devious grief is, how quickly it sets in. It's like a corrosive acid, deep down inside, eating away. I'm leaning over, resting my arms on my knees. On the other side of the accordion curtain, I can see a portion of the oncology wing. I've never spent any time in this room before; I've only walked in and out of it. I'm sitting on an imitation-leather sofa. In front of me, there's a low table and two empty chairs. The green floor is covered with small dark spots that move frenetically before my eyes, like microbes under a microscope. Because now it seems to me that I've been expecting this tragedy to happen.

We're separated by one corridor, two doors and a coma. The distance between us is like a prison, but I'm wondering if it might be possible to break free of it, to imagine it as a kind of confessional, and to request an audience with you right here, my child, right on this floor with the dancing spots.

I'm a surgeon, a man who has learned to divide things, to separate healthy parts from diseased ones. I've saved many lives, but not my own, Angela.

We've lived in the same house for fifteen years. You can recognise my smell, my footstep. You know how I touch things; you know the even sound of my voice. You know both sides of my character, the gentle side and the irritating, indefensible, hostile side. I don't really know what you think of me, but I can imagine. You think I'm a responsible father, not without a certain sardonic sense of humour, but too aloof. You and your mother have a solid bond; sometimes your relationship is stormy, but it's always very much alive. I've hung around in the background, like an empty suit in a wardrobe. You've learned more about me from my absences, my books, my raincoat in the hall, than you have from my flesh-and-blood self. And I don't know that other story, the one you and your mother have written about me with the help of the clues I've left here and there. Like your mother, you've come to prefer missing me, because having me around requires too much effort. Many a morning, I've left the house with the sensation that the two of you, bursting with all that energy, were pushing me towards the door to get me out of the way. I love the natural rapport between you and your mother, it brings a smile to my face; to some degree, you two have protected me from myself. For my part, I've never felt 'natural'. I've tried hard to be - I've made some pretty drastic attempts - but when you have to

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try to be natural, you're already defeated. So I've long since accepted the blueprint you made for me, the carbon copy that responded to your needs. I've been a regular guest in my own house. I've never got angry, not even when it's rained on my day off and the maid has spread out the drying rack with your clothes on it, yours and your mother's, next to the radiator in my study. I've grown accustomed to these damp intrusions; I never complain. I remain in my armchair, unable to stretch my legs out completely, I place the book in my lap and I stare at your laundry. I've found company in those wet clothes, perhaps more so than with the two of you in person, because I could catch in their thin, gleaming fabrics the brotherly fragrance of nostalgia. I've thought of you two, of course, but I've felt nostalgia principally for myself, for the days when I was a fugitive from justice. Angela, I know that my hugs and kisses have been stilted and awkward for too many years. Every time I've put my arms around you, I've felt your body quivering with impatience, if not downright discomfort. You could never feel at ease with me, that's all. It was enough for you to know that I was there, to look at me from a distance, as though I were a traveller on another train, standing at the window, with his face blurred by the glass. You're a sensitive, sunny girl, but your mood can change in a second; you often fly into a blind fury. I've always suspected that that mysterious rage, which leaves you baffled and a little sad, has grown inside you because of me.

Angela, there's an empty chair right behind you, behind your innocent back. And there's an empty chair inside of me. I look at it, at its back and its legs, I wait, and I seem to hear something. It's the sound of hope. I know about hope. I've heard it busily throbbing in dying bodies, I've seen it dawn in the eyes of a thousand patients, I've felt it sputter and stall every time I've moved my hands and decided the course of someone's life. I know exactly how I'm deluding myself. I stare at the dark flecks on this floor - they're moving slowly now, like soot - and I delude myself into thinking that I see a woman in that empty chair, even if only for a moment, filling it not with her body, no, but with her pity. I see two low-cut wine-coloured shoes, two bare legs, a forehead that's too high. And already she's there in front of me, come to remind me that I'm a plague-spreader, a man who marks others for misfortune, carelessly including those who love him. You don't know her - she passed through my life before you were born, but her passage left an indelible imprint, like a fossil. I want to reach out to you, Angela; I want to join you in that tangle of tubes where you're lying, where the craniotome is about to break your head open, and tell you the story of that woman.

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