Prologue: *Inside*

My grandmother was sixteen when she fell asleep.

What she remembered most from those weeks was the whiteness and the emptiness. Not whiteness like snow or fresh paint, but one caused by the complete lack of anything else, the same way a dense fog can consume everything in its path. She also felt cool, like the summer nights when she slept with a bowl of ice in front of the fan. Everything seemed cold and vacant and white.

She could see herself present in the room, but she was not herself. She was polished somehow. Smooth and sculpted like a statue. She tried to lift her arm, but it would not move. She concentrated and tried again, but she felt as though her arms, hands, legs and feet were no longer connected to her brain, no longer accepting commands. At that point, she became frightened. An overwhelming, claustrophobic fear seized her: she *was* a statue.

As though her mind could only take so much of this stress, she began to pull away, teetering on the edge between a dream and wakefulness. Finally, her mind told her that she was only dreaming, it was only a nightmare, and she felt the relief rush through her like a winter breath. She began to feel her bed sheets on her skin and sensed the sallow light from her eastward window. She struggled to come out of the dream and open her eyes, but it would not happen. The feeling that something terrible was happening, a taste of the nightmare, remained.

There were things she knew even through her closed eyes: in the morning, the drapes opened and the lamps were extinguished, the smell of gas still streaming from the wick. When the drapes closed again in the afternoon heat, it was like a heavy cloud passing in front of the sun. She could smell the purple, bearded iris that her mother kept in a vase on the piano. And she remembered how she ended up in bed, when drowsy, feverish and weak, she had fallen down the stairs of her parents' home.

There were things she could not know with her eyes closed: the passing of time. Time, after all, is a fixed point in life we take for granted. To lose it is like losing balance. She could not feel herself, or at least how to control herself. Her body no longer answered to her mind. She was imprisoned by bars of bone in a windowless cell. And she did not know the strange voices that came and went from her room, mingling with the sound of her parents' voices. She heard them discuss how many weeks of school she had missed; she heard them say *sleeping sickness*.

The year was 1929, and at the time, Virginia and her family had no way of knowing she was joining millions of others suffering from a strange, global pandemic – a disease that would change medicine itself, but vanish from medical history. A disease that would kill close to a million people and leave thousands more languishing in mental institutions for the rest of their lives. An epidemic that nearly a century later remains a mystery, but could strike again.

Virginia's mother spoke to her in that calm tone of voice used for bloodied shins or turned ankles, and her room was filled with the muffled voices of doctors. What was

most frightening was the uncertainty in their voices. They did not know what had caused this in a healthy, teenage girl, and worse, they did not know how to stop this endless sleep. Her temperature was taken several times and noted on her chart. She felt the doctor's hand against her wrist and on the stem of artery along her neck. And then, over the course of the days and weeks, she heard the doctors pronounce her dead – three different times. Each time, she listened to her parents weep and heard them make plans for her viewing and burial.

She could not even tell them they were wrong.