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What She Left Behind and Other Stories

A Thesis in English

by

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What She Left Behind

On the day her sister went into the hospital, Josie drove out to the Willows. The weather was cool, a light dip into spring, with mist that clung to her hair but not to her skin. The boardwalk was almost empty. A handful of people walked toward and away from her, other locals who knew to come before the weather warmed, before the tourists found their way. From the arcade, she heard coins dancing together to the music of retro video games. The smells of salt, wet wood, and metal mixed with fried dough, Chinese food, and butter. Josie bought a bag of sweet popcorn from E.W. Hobbs and chucked it at the seagulls, kernel by kernel. *I hope it kills you*, she had said to her sister.

Bored with the desperation of the birds, Josie found a flat rock, still damp from the morning rain, and sat overlooking the Salem-Beverly Bridge. She poured what was left of her popcorn into the water, smiling as the kernels lost their form and became what seemed to be bits of yellow mucus drifting and rising with the current. Her cell phone buzzed from the pocket of her jeans and sang, "Whole Wide World." Josie thought about throwing the phone in, too, imagined the *plop* and splash when it broke the surface and was sucked under, the shocked, bug eyed faces of the small fish it would surely disturb on its way to the rocky New England seafloor. She thought of the phone flipping open and her mother's water-warped voice telling the seaweed, "Your sister's okay. Josie, can you hear me? She's okay."

Josie kicked her feet to the strumming of the bass until her phone stopped vibrating and the song stopped playing. She took the phone out, disappointed to find that the call she'd casually missed had been her boyfriend, not her mother or brother-in-law calling with an update.

There was a voicemail, but Josie didn't listen to it. They all said the same thing, more or less:

"Where are you? I love you. Call me back." She thought she might this time.

When it started to rain, Josie drove home. She made a grilled veggie wrap with hummus but left it untouched on a cobalt blue plate in the center of her kitchen counter. She turned off the kitchen light, leaving her apartment almost dark but for the light coming from the television, left on from that morning. Inside the set, two birds admired the transparency of a freshly cleaned glass door. Josie found a marathon of *Friends* reruns on TBS and curled up on the couch and laughed. When it was black outside, she checked her phone again, wondering if she had somehow missed another call, or a text.

Maybe it will kill me, her sister had said, *And then where would you be?*

Somewhere else, Josie had said.

Without her sister, Josie thought she would be far away, living in another country, speaking another language, eating brie and drinking wine. Or at the very least she would be working for a law firm in Chicago or New York instead of flying through part-time temp positions that kept her close to home. She wouldn't be sitting for hours in the parking lots of Top Specialists, reading worn out romance novels while she waited for more blood to be drawn, more urine to be collected, more options to be explained. She wouldn't be making peanut butter and Fluff sandwiches for her three-year-old niece because her sister just couldn't cope with everything that day and her brother-in-law couldn't take any more days off from work.

Josie was still on the couch when her boyfriend knocked at 7:00 a.m. He had his own key, but he knocked anyway, no matter how often Josie insisted that he didn't have to. She called for him to come in, heard the key tum, the rustle of the Dunkin Donuts bag that no doubt contained at least one glazed stick for him and a strawberry frosted for her. She could smell his

coffee, too, and all the extra sugar he had put into it. He came in and stood in front of the couch, fresh, dressed for work, looking at her with his head tilted to the right. Josie yawned and pulled her legs up so he could sit down.

"You're not at your job," he said, no rise in his voice at the end, no question. "Did you at least call to let them know? Josie, you need to let them know. You'll get fired."

"I'm just temporary anyway," Josie said.

They ate their doughnuts, and before he left for work her boyfriend cleaned up the plate in the kitchen and kissed the top of her head. Josie saw him look at her phone, turned face-down against the coffee table. "You should call them," he said, and locked the door behind him.

Josie didn't call. She went into work the next day, and when her manager asked her where she had been she said that her sister had gone into the hospital for surgery, and didn't he remember her telling him so? He apologized and asked how her sister was doing, and when Josie said, "I don't know," he left her alone for the rest of the morning.

At lunch she went out with her coworkers to a little Polish cafe that had just opened up off Lappin Park. She ordered mushroom pierogi and a water. One of her coworkers said, "I heard your sister was in the hospital. I hope she's okay."

"She's great," Josie said.

"That's wonderful," her coworker said, and clasped her hand over Josie's. "I'm so happy to hear it. Was it anything serious?"

"Boob job," Josie said, and sucked water through her straw. Her coworker removed her hand and stabbed a piece of kielbasa that had been resting near the edge of her plate.

"I'm just kidding," Josie said.

The next day, Josie did not go out with her coworkers for lunch. She stopped for soup and strolled along Pickering Wharf, looking through storefront windows, sometimes going in. In one of the shops there were necklaces with clear glass pendants filled with silver mainsprings and balance wheels and petite brass gears, all suspended within their square and heart-shaped cases. She picked up a long rectangular necklace and held the chain against her collar bone. The piece fell low on her chest, the different metals clashing with her skin.

Why aren't you doing anything with yourself? Her sister had asked, when Josie signed on with the temp agency.

I'm doing this, Josie had said.

Josie held the pendant in front of her, fingering the soft comers of the box. One of the gears glinted in the sunlight streaming through the store's wall of windows.

"My wife makes them," the man behind the counter said. "That one suits you," he added.

"It does," Josie said. She left without the necklace.

Josie looked in more shops. She walked toward her office building but passed the door instead of going in. She bought herself tiramisu-flavored gelato and ate it on a bench across from a church. When her manager called to ask why she hadn't come back from lunch, Josie told him that she had had to go to the hospital, she was sorry, but she wouldn't be back that afternoon. "Perhaps you should take a few days," he said. "Perhaps you need some time to be with your family. We'll still be here on Monday."

"Thank you, I'll be in on Monday," Josie said. She finished her gelato and went home.

On Saturday her boyfriend phoned and she talked to him. He asked if her family had called yet, and couldn't believe it when she said no. After all you've done? he asked. He listed off a number of things Josie had helped her sister with, as if she didn't know, as if his argument

was with her. Josie put the phone in her lap and listened to the soft rise and fall of his jabbering. When he finally stopped talking she brought the phone back to her ear and said she thought they might all just be busy, she was sure they would call her soon. Just before Josie hung up, he said softly, "Maybe something went wrong."

On Sunday, Josie gave in and called her mother.

"She's fine, Josie honey," her mother said. "She has a long recovery ahead of her, but she came through just fine. I'm flying back to Raleigh next Thursday. We should go out to dinner, catch up, just you and me."

On Monday, Josie went back to work.

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After Josie's job went from part-time temp to full-time permanent, after her boyfriend said that they should get married, after she said yes but let's wait a little longer, after she started to consider law school again, the cancer came back.

"I need you to take me to see Dr. Scheinman," her sister said. Josie said, "Okay."

"Pick me up tomorrow at 2:30," her sister said.

They drove and sat in an office and her sister repeated back to her the same words they had both heard before, just in a different order. Cancer. Surgery. Radiation. "The second tumor is smaller," the doctor said. "It was probably there during the first surgery, but we missed it because it was on the other side."

Josie's boyfriend took her away for the weekend. They hiked trails canopied in the burnt orange of autumn, drank hot chocolate and then wine, had sex. Her boyfriend said they should do this more often. She told him she felt overwhelmed at her job, and he said she should look for a new one. She told him she wasn't sure anymore about law school. They visited Table Rock, and

a stranger took a picture of them standing on the edge, holding onto each other. In Tilton, Josie made him stop at the outlets, and they ended up not getting home until dark.

I'm scared, her sister had said the first time. *You have to come with me*, she had said the morning of her biopsy.

It's probably nothing, Josie had said.

At work they were inundated with case files. A minor discrepancy in one drug case had gone public and led to thousands of old cases coming under review. Even clients whose drug testing had not been processed by the lab in question called daily to discuss filing appeals. "You never know," they said.

"I need you to pull this file for me," one of the attorneys said.

"Can you find this document for me?" another said. "You'll need the hard copy, it's in the basement."

Her boyfriend called at 11:30 to ask if she could meet him for lunch, and she said no. Her brother-in-law left a voicemail asking if she could pick up her niece.

"Hold my calls and set up this conference," the office manager said. "Oh, and I need you to serve this subpoena. It's fine, I OK'd it with Mitchell."

Josie pulled files and found documents. She made phone calls and arranged meetings. She skipped her break. She stacked boxes and drank coffee. She waited at the police department for half an hour to serve her first subpoena. At 2:30 PM she set aside the files on her desk, and said that she was taking a late lunch. She left a message for her brother-in-law that she would be able to pick up her niece.

Josie parked across the street from the preschool. She watched parents holding hands with their children, children much younger than Josie thought should be at school. She watched

how they opened the gate and closed it softly behind them, the good ones knowing to shake it a bit and make sure it had locked securely. Taylor was somewhere inside, probably already in her red coat, holding her Mystery Van-shaped backpack. Did children today even know who Scooby Doo was, Josie had wondered when Taylor had first shown off her bag.

She went in, signed Taylor out, and took her by the hand.

"Can we go to the park?" Taylor asked.

"Not today," Josie said. "I have to get back to work."

"Please? Mommy and Daddy never take me," Taylor said.

"Just for a little while," Josie said. She opened and closed the gate, shook it.

On their way back to the car, one of the fathers smiled at Josie. "She looks just like you," he said. Josie didn't see the caramel-colored ribbon curls or the freckles. She saw the green eyes. She looks just like her mother, and her mother looks just like me, Josie thought. She didn't bother to correct the man, just smiled and buckled Taylor into her seat.

When they got to the park, Josie left her cell phone in the car. She pushed Taylor on the swings and, when Taylor slid down the big slide for the first time, Josie caught her at the bottom and wrapped her up in a hug. More than an hour passed. Josie sat on a bench while Taylor sawed and climbed. She held her arms out while Taylor attempted the monkey bars. Five o'clock came and went. When another little girl pushed Taylor over to get to the tire swing first, Josie told her that there were people who waited in shadows to eat little girls like her.

"Can we go down the slide again?" Taylor said. It was getting dark and the wind had picked up. Almost all of the other children had been or were being led away to their homes, to warmth, to dinner.

"Time to go home now," Josie said.

"Just one more time?" Taylor pleaded.

"Not today."

When Josie brought Taylor home, her brother-in-law berated her for being late. Her sister asked why Taylor's clothes were so dirty and why there was a rip in her jeans. Taylor told them about the park. Josie told them about the slide. Her brother-in-law asked why she hadn't called back. Josie said she hadn't even noticed they had called in the first place. Her sister said they had been so worried.

"I can't believe you," her sister said.

"I'm sorry," Josie said.

At dinner her boyfriend told her he had gotten a promotion. He said when his pay raise took effect he was thinking of moving into a bigger place. He ordered a bottle of white. Under the table he let his hand rest on her knee and brought up marriage again.

"I can't right now," Josie said.

"Why not?" he said.

"There's too much going on," Josie said. Her boyfriend took his hand from her knee. "I can't worry about doctors and scans and plan a wedding at the same time. I can't think about moving."

"When are you going to stop living their life?" he said.

"She needs me," Josie said.

"I need you too."

At work Josie made up excuses for missing meetings. She told her manager she would need to return to a part-time schedule until her sister was well again. He told her he understood

family commitments, but he hoped could keep focused at work. "We could really use every hand we've got in riding out this shit show," he said.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Josie said.

Josie shifted her schedule to accommodate appointments, pick-ups, and play dates. The case files piled up on her desk.

"I need you to run this to the D.A.'s office," her manager said. "Just leave it with the guy at the front and come back; I need this stuff cleared up by five." He gestured to the files he had left for her two days prior. Josie took her time. She stopped and grabbed herself a large coffee and drank half of it before she returned to the office. When she arrived at her desk, one of the new temps had taken most of the files and was entering the information into the system .

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When it started to snow, Josie's manager asked her into his office. Josie picked up a legal pad and readied her pen. She asked if she should bring specific files, if he needed to go over a specific case. "We need to let you go," her manager said. "I understand that you have a lot going on personally, but we have a lot going on, too."

"I understand," Josie said.

"We really need someone who can be here and be focused," he said.

Josie wrote a note to herself to call the temp agency in the morning. She said goodbye to the attorneys that she liked, and thanked one of them for the information he had given her about law school.

"It's a time suck," he said.

"I know," she said.

"You can't be so distracted," he said.

She organized the case files she had on her desk in order of importance , and stuck post-it notes to each detailing what the case was waiting on before it could be closed. She packed up her coffee mug and the bottle of aspirin she kept in her desk drawer.

When she got home, her cell phone rang .

"Taylor is starting her dance lessons tomorrow afternoon ," her sister said.

"Oh," Josie said . "That's nice."

Her sister said, "Can you drive her?"

"No," Josie said, "I have to work."

"It would take you half an hour, max," her sister said . "You don 't even have to pick her up afterwards."

"I've taken too many half hours," Josie said.

Josie's sister hung up the phone. A few minutes later it rang again . Josie turned it off. She threw away her note about the temp agency and went to bed.

In the morning Josie switched her phone back on and listened to two voicemails, one from her sister apologizing for hanging up on her, and another from her boyfriend. "We need to talk," he said. "I love you . Call me back."

Josie stopped answering her phone, stopped returning calls. Checking her voicemails and deleting them became part of her bedtime routine . Shower. Apply face cream . Brush teeth. Pee. Wash hands. Listen to the parade of voices she had trapped in her pocket.

"You need to help your sister with this ," her mother said. "She can 't do it on her own."

"Josie, I have to go in for another surgery," her sister said. "Please call me back."

"Can you pick Taylor up from preschool? " her brother-in-law said.

"Your sister is in the hospital again," her mother said. "You could at least check in to see how she's doing."

"Where are you?" her boyfriend said. "I never see you anymore."

Sleep.

What's wrong with you? her sister had said once. *It's not like you 're the one with a terminal illness. It's not like you 're the one who's dying.*

After about a week of collecting voicemails, Josie had had enough and let her phone's battery run out. The dark Droid became a useless shell of plastic that took up space on her countertop. She perused law school websites and filled out forms to be sent information. When the information came, she read it all. She read articles online that urged her to reconsider a legal career. "Jobs in law are quickly disappearing," they said. "Reconsider your application." Josie called her former manager and asked him to reconsider the loss of her position.

"I let myself become sidetracked," she said. "I shouldn't have done that."

"We've already hired a temp," her former manager said.

"I know the job. I liked it," Josie said. "It's what I want to do."

"Maybe if the new hire doesn't work out," he said. "Maybe then we'll give you a call."

"Thank you," Josie said.

Josie applied to other jobs. She signed back on with the temp agency. While she waited, she walked. She returned to the Wharf. The skies were heavy with winter, and grey. Chips of ice burned into her face and hands. The rectangular necklace was gone, but there was another she liked, smaller, square. She traced the outline of one of the gears with her fingernail and smudged the glass. She rubbed it with the bottom of her shirt.

The man behind the counter said, "My wife makes them." He said, "That one suits you."

"Does it?" Josie asked. She paid the man \$48.00 and he helped her to put the necklace on.

Josie walked home. She made tea and focused on a crossword puzzle. When it got dark she turned on a lamp and read about becoming a legal assistant. A couple of hours later, she heard a *tap-tap-tap* on her apartment door. "Josie, it's me," her boyfriend said. Josie closed her laptop. She left her boyfriend knocking. *Tap-tap-tap*.

Josie went into the bedroom. She pulled the comforter from her bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. The blanket trailed behind her like a robe as she made her way back to the couch in the dark. *Tap-tap-tap*. The television was off, but she watched it as though there was movement in there anyway, as though there was something waiting for her in the glossy, empty curve of the screen. She watched it long enough that her eyes became unfocused and when she moved on the couch her eyes caught the reflection and she thought that there was something really in there, something that she should be paying attention to.

Mrs. Dalton

Daydreaming about killing Mr. Dalton kept Mrs. Dalton from actually doing so. She would think about it while making dinner or working in the garden, relishing the thought of his still body growing colder. Whenever he pissed her off, which was more and more often, it seemed, she imagined the various ways she could do it—a shot to the head, poison in his coffee, a pillow over the face. Most times, though, she found that the deaths she envisioned were too messy, or too predictable.

Her favorite fantasy involved catching him in the bathroom on a Sunday morning when he would be most relaxed—perhaps shaving or brushing his teeth. She would find a way to get his self-involved head from the mirror into the toilet, not minding her smaller size to his large one. The bowl would be fresh and clean, just done that morning, and she would make sure a new tablet had been dropped into the tank so the water, a lovely royal blue, would smell like rain. The bubbles would lighten into a more delicate powder color as he struggled against her for air.

"A blue chemical substance used for household cleaning was found in his lungs and stomach," the prosecution would say (fancier than "toilet water"), and her defense would try to paint a dismal landscape of an emotionally barren marriage and plead temporary insanity, a plea which she knew was rarely ever successful outside television or film. She would cry hysterically, feigning the mourning widow over the merciless murderer. A year later, Lifetime Movie Network would release a film based on the events. The movie would be called something cheesy, perhaps "Black Widow" or "The Death That Love Made." Mrs. Dalton preferred the latter.

When the bubbles finally stopped, Mrs. Dalton would drag Mr. Dalton out of the toilet

and sit him up while she cleaned his face of freshly-scented (but harmful!) chemicals. She would blow dry his hair and comb over those areas where the strands were starting to thin out- he should look nice, she would tell herself, just as though they were church-goers and he was on his way to the morning's sermon. His shirt would have to be changed, too, of course; the splashing water would no doubt stain the collar and shoulders, and what kind of wife would she be if she let him go out like that?

When she was done she would bring him into the kitchen, where she would have already laid out his favorite breakfast: cinnamon toast and scrambled eggs with manchego cheese and red peppers. She would sit him up in his chair and place his hands gently on the table, one near the cutlery, and the other near his empty glass. Mrs. Dalton would then offer Mr. Dalton some orange juice, taking his silence as a no, and though she would want to tell him just how good the nutrients in orange juice are for his heart, she wouldn't want to be a nag. Rather, she would eat her own toast with raspberry jam, and eggs, sunny-side up, just like her. They would eat quietly, as they usually did, just the two of them waiting for the rest of the neighborhood to wake.

It seemed a creative way to destroy a man, and she liked that.



It was a Saturday, and the dishwasher was broken. Mrs. Dalton stood over the sink, scrubbing at a daffodil-yellow coffee mug. When Mr. Dalton had built the house, she had asked him to put a large window behind the kitchen sink. They hadn't had a dishwasher then, and she liked to watch the neighborhood while she cleaned. Teenagers new to love would traipse by holding hands, fathers would teach their sons and daughters to play basketball in their driveways.

But now the window was a tease. Across the street, her neighbor, a woman no more than twenty-five, was picked up by a shadow in a silver BMW. The month before it had been a red Cadillac, and some other high-end vehicle the month before that. Mrs. Dalton never saw the

drivers, but imagined they were middle-aged bachelors with salt-and-pepper hair, dressed in fancy suits to complement their fancy cars. They were lawyers, accountants, and CEOs, all reliving their youth, all willing to drop what they could on fine dining, jewelry, the theatre whatever it took for a night of steamy sex with someone whose breasts hadn't yet succumbed to the tug of gravity. Mrs. Dalton pursed her lips and scrubbed a little harder.

When she had been young and perky, she would wear one of her husband's raggedy t-shirts while she had washed the dishes. She had been careless then, in her chores and in her manner, and more often than not she had splashed soapy water onto the counter, soaking her stomach where she was pressed against it. Mr. Dalton used to love to come home and find her just like that, and they would make love right there for the whole street to see.

Mrs. Dalton brought the sponge around the rim of the mug to lift away the peach-colored imprint of her lower lip, then dipped down to clean the sides. Age had covered the glass with hairline fissures. The inside was tarnished by years of morning coffees and afternoon teas. It was the last piece of a dish set she had received as a wedding gift over eighteen years ago. She folded the sponge into the handle. The small pressure caused it to break away almost effortlessly, and the mug slipped into the sink, shattering.

"Fuck!" Sunlight streamed in through the window, and the yellow pieces seemed to glow against the silver of the sink. Mrs. Dalton stomped her feet. She had been so careful, cherishing this last small piece of her wedding gift after piece by piece the rest of the set had broken and been thrown away. Now there was nothing. She screamed at the chips of glass, *"Fuck fuck fuck fuckfuck!"* and threw the handle to the floor.

Mr. Dalton eased into the doorway, his cheeks flushed. He didn't look at the broken glass on the floor or come close enough to see the shards in the sink. He just looked at her.

"Knock it off, will you?" he snapped. "You're scaring the damn dog."

After he stormed back into the parlor, Mrs. Dalton considered the empty space that filled the doorway. She hadn't meant to scare her dog, a now-ancient German Shepherd-black lab mix. Mr. Dalton had brought him home on their fourth anniversary, and though Pepper-that was what she had named him-was intended by the increasingly busy Mr. Dalton to keep his lonely wife company during the day, he was also meant to protect the Daltons' home and children. But the Daltons were never able to have children, and the most that Pepper ever did for their home was uproot the flowers in the garden-the tulips, not the daffodils. Mrs. Dalton loved him anyway.

As she swept up the broken handle and cleaned out the sink, she wondered who would take care of Pepper if she did ever kill Mr. Dalton. She rarely thought of what would happen if she were accused and actually found guilty, but one had to be practical-the dog couldn't very well fend for himself, and several of the ways by which she would kill Mr. Dalton suggested premeditation. There were, on the other hand, those deaths that could appear accidental.

Mrs. Dalton wasn't as fond of these plans, because they usually entailed a less hands-on approach, and she saw herself as a hands-on type of woman; she wanted to feel the life leave her husband, not just watch it. It was important though, for Pepper, that she at least try to avoid conviction, and so sometimes-when she was reminded of the dog's frailty-she would fabricate a different kind of death for Mr. Dalton. She toyed with roof mishaps during the holiday season, or faulty brakes when it was nearing the time for her husband to bring his car in. Irony, the neighbors would say as they piled into her living room to give their condolences. She would nod and sigh-if only he had made the appointment for the brake change a week sooner. Mrs. Dalton

smiled. Though the idea of her husband's brake failure tickled her, lately she had been thinking suicide.

Mr. Dalton was a busy man. It was conceivable that the amount of time he devoted to his work had left him feeling trapped, and that being a man of pride, he could never admit his unhappiness to anyone, not even his loving wife. But how would he do it? Her mind came again to the possibility of a gun, but her husband wouldn't even allow one in the house. She didn't think he could sit in a car long enough to die, and there was nowhere around the house from which he could hang himself.

The question stumped her. She knew her husband better than anyone, she was sure, but the way by which a man would kill himself seemed a very personal decision and she wanted to be sure to get it right.



That night, after a long day spent weeding the gardens and tidying the house, after polishing off the dishes, Mrs. Dalton collected a pool of olive oil into her palm from a bottle she kept next to the sink in the bathroom. The house was very calm and still. She pressed her hands together and then to her face, massaging the oil into the creases around her eyes, her nose, and then around her mouth. Black ran and smudged beneath her lashes, and with the shadow she saw how very tired she looked, how very ugly. She drew a white, cotton oval across her skin to remove the oil and makeup. Beige and brown and pink, colors she had pressed into her skin that morning, smeared across the pad. She drew it up under her eyes, wiping away the ruined mascara, but the shadows lingered.

She bowed her face into the sink and ran cool water across her skin. Then she patted her face dry and turned out the light. On her way out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, she stubbed her toe along the protruding base of the toilet.

"Shit," she hissed, then cupped her hand over her mouth.

The bedroom was already dark and quiet; only the heavy, even breathing from Mr. Dalton's side of the bed gave away that anyone else was there. Mrs. Dalton slid in beside him, thinking of when they had first been married, of how they had been sure to go to bed together and stay up late relishing one another's skin—the scent, the taste. Sometimes they would just sprawl across each other and talk about which childhood mishap had resulted in which scar, how the freckle on the back of her ankle was her favorite of all of them, or how once, in fourth grade, he had made a girl cry by telling her that she couldn't play on his kickball team at recess. They would stay awake through the night, dreaming all the same.

Mrs. Dalton wondered now when they had run out of stories to share with one another.

"I think I'll replant the tulips tomorrow, what do you think?" she asked her slumbering husband. She paused, giving enough time for his imagined response, and sighed. "Oh, I know that it's Sunday; I just thought I would do something productive. Maybe you're right, though—I should relax. We could spend the whole day together, wouldn't that be nice?"

She was quiet for a few minutes, then rolled over and smiled at her husband's back. "You know what?" She asked, stroking his shoulder lightly so as not to wake him, and a thin smile found its way to her lips. "I could make us breakfast." Yes, she had everything she needed for a decent serving of cinnamon toast with eggs.

The Mulben-y Tree

The morning after she arrived in North Carolina , after she had breakfast and helped her grandmother to clean up the kitchen table , Lily went upstairs. Her parents were back in Boston. A week after summer vacation started, her parents had told her she would be going to North Carolina, and her grandmother had come to take her away. Because she had come without her parents , she was allowed to stay in her mother 's old bedroom. She folded herself against the big bay window with a book. The Southern sun sunk through the glass and wrapped itself around her.

Lily loved this room because it was bigger and brighter than the room in which she usually stayed, but everything in it, from the wooden floors to the yellowed floral wallpaper, was a memory belonging to someone else. The bed was the only piece of furniture that was in any way a recent addition , and even it was older than Lily-it was a simple queen that her mother had bought once she had met Lily's father and was sure she would always be bringing someone home with her. The rest was furniture from her childhood-a dresser and oval mirror on the wall above it, three mismatched wooden bookshelves , two of them rather small, a cream desk and a hutch with a matching chair.

There were photos everywhere. Some were of Lily 's parents ' wedding , and some were of Lily when she was a baby, or going to school for the first time, or dressed as a peacock for her second Halloween. The most recent-a photograph of a shocked, freshly-turned -nine Lily covered in frosting-was over two years old. Those were the ones her grandmother had added to the room . But most were photographs that Lily 's mother , Edalene , had picked and put there a

long time ago: her at her prom; her and Lily's father when they were just dating, their faces smashed together and smiling on a Ferris wheel; both of them on their graduation day at the University of North Carolina.

Lily's favorite thing in the room was the window seat. Her grandfather had built it for her mother when she was a little girl. Edalene had loved to read outside, but she had often been very sick and would need to stay in her room. So he built her a seat in the bay window where she could read and still enjoy the sunshine. Lily liked to do the same. With her legs up and her head leaning against the glass, it was as though she were somehow still a part of the world outside the window, as though she were safe inside but also in the grass and the sky and the brook and the great mulberry tree that defined her grandmother's backyard. Whenever she arrived at her grandmother's house, Lily dropped her bags on the floor, took out a book, and curled up against one of the soft, oversized purple pillows. She could stay there for hours.

But today she didn't have the chance to read long before her grandmother came into the room. "You look just like your mother sitting there," she said. She gave each of Lily's two suitcases a thump. "Come on, girl, let's get these things put away."

Lily sighed. Her grandmother always made her unpack every little thing, even when she was there for only a short time. "No sense in tripping over your luggage," she'd say, and Lily thought how silly someone would have to be to be tripping over a bag or two in such a big room. She pulled her suitcases to the middle of the floor and opened them up. She pretended not to notice when her grandmother shook her head at the mess inside. When Lily had been young, her mother would pack for her, and the clothes would be folded to the same size and fit into the suitcase so neatly and tightly that when she got to wherever she was going and opened it up,

nothing would seem to have moved. But Lily hadn't folded anything; she had thrown her clothes in and, without a second thought, had zipped the cases shut.

They began to put the clothes away, taking out each piece, refolding it and placing it into the drawers, or unscrunching it and placing it onto hangers and into the small closet.

"What is this?" her grandmother asked and clucked her tongue. She pulled out a dress. The skirt up through the waist was black and pleated, while the top was white with flutter sleeves and a deep v-neck. "This dress isn't appropriate for someone your age; you wouldn't even fit into it yet. What was Edalene thinking when she bought you this?"

"I picked that out," Lily said, grabbing the dress. She rolled it into a ball and stuffed it into a drawer. "Mom doesn't take me shopping anymore," she said. "I go to the mall with my friends now."

Her grandmother frowned and stared at the open drawer. She looked as if she were about to say something about the way Lily had put the dress away, and Lily was surprised when instead she bowed her head and stuck out her bottom lip.

"No, of course she doesn't," she said. When she had been quiet for what Lily was sure was too long, she looked up and smiled too big, and said, "You're getting so much older-too old for your mother to take you shopping, aren't you?"

"She's too busy to take me shopping," Lily said.

"Yes, I'm sure it must seem that way." Her grandmother stood up. "How about you finish putting these things away, neatly-take that dress out and hang it in the closet, please-and I'll go put on some tea, hm?"

Lily did as her grandmother asked. She removed the dress, shook it out, and held it up before her. There were a few wrinkles near the bottom hem. Lily spread the dress across the bed

and with just her hand tried to smooth the edge. Each time she removed her hand, the wrinkles popped back into place, and she pushed harder against the dress. Over and over again she pulled her hand across the hem, taking pleasure in watching the fabric change with how she touched it. Minutes passed. When Lily heard a clang in the kitchen below and her grandmother's footsteps in the hallway, then on the stairs, she jerked her hand away. She quickly fitted the dress onto a hanger. Before she put the dress into the closet, she pressed her nose into the neck and smelled what little lingered there of her mother's perfume .

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Jacob Miller was just about Lily's age. His brothers were both grown and out of high school, and so whenever Lily showed up just a couple of houses down, it would be only a couple of days before his mother would usher him down the road and out of her hair-or so Jacob said she said. Lily knew only a few of the other children who lived in her grandmother's town, most she had been introduced to at parties or barbecues whenever she and her parents had been visiting. But she didn't like very many of them. She liked Jacob.

Lily's grandmother had once told her that Jacob had been "a late surprise," though Lily wasn't sure what sort of surprise he was supposed to be or for whom--certainly not for her. He was everything that she wasn't: dark-haired and dark-eyed, with ruddy cheeks and sun-toasted skin. His jeans were always mucky, and she was sure he didn't own a single pair without at least one rip. But that was because he climbed everything. He climbed trees all the time, and when Lily tried too, he didn't make fun of her for not being able to. Instead, he showed her how.

"Don't pull with your arms, push with your legs. That's it," he said, and gave her a boost.

When she said she didn't want to go any higher than the first branch, he told her that was okay

and helped her back down.

Jacob usually showed up some time after lunch and sometimes didn't leave until after dinner. Back home, Lily always went to her friends' houses; they never came to hers, not even for a minute. Not anymore, anyway. She couldn't remember the last time her parents had allowed her to have a sleepover. When she had asked if she could have one for her eleventh birthday, Lily's father had smiled and said, "How about I take you to Six Flags instead? Wouldn't that be more fun for you and your friends?" He always said things like that, things like, "Wouldn't that be better?" or "Wouldn't you prefer?" and even though Lily wanted to say no, she knew she should say yes.

But all Lily's grandmother wanted to know was where she and Jacob were. If they were going to his place, Lily had to say so and to call when they got there to say what time she would be home. If it was going to be dark, Lily's grandmother would collect her. If they were going to play in the yard, that was fine, but they had to stay within sight of the house. "You could get lost in those woods," her grandmother said.

Most days, Lily and Jacob stayed by the brook behind the house. It was too hot to do anything else, and the cool water and the shade of the mulberry kept them happy.

"I'm going to build you a swing and hang it from this tree," Jacob said, swinging with his arms from the branch that extended over the water. For days the air had been so thick that even the birds kept still in the branches, and the leaves seemed to be curling in upon their own shadows.

"Why?" Lily asked.

"Because it would be fun!" He stopped swinging and climbed up to another branch, and another. "I could make it big, and we could swing over the water."

"Jacob, come back down," Lily said. "You're going too high."

"Don't worry so much," Jacob said and pulled himself up higher. Just watching him climb that high made Lily's heart beat faster, but he stood looking down at her with a wide grin, hands on his hips as though he had conquered a mountain.

"Please come down?" Lily said, and maybe it was that he listened or maybe it was the sudden quiet that made Jacob descend. Above them, the sun had been overtaken by burdened clouds, draping all of it—the brook, the tree, the house—in an eerie yellow twilight. As Jacob and Lily watched, the clouds, unable to contain their storm any longer, broke. Rain rumbled down, splashing their foreheads and noses. Lily ran for the house and Jacob ran toward home, his arms held over his head.

In the mudroom, Lily chucked her shoes and socks and let the water from her clothes run onto the smooth green tiles. Her grandmother was on the phone in the kitchen. Her voice was tense, and Lily pulled herself back from the door and listened.

I know it's hard, Charlie, but it takes time to figure out what works.

No, Lily's fine. You need to worry about everything going on there.

I know, but we knew this could happen eventually.

She's outside playing. I am, Charlie; I'm keeping an eye on her.

The rain kept lashing against the house, thousands of fingers knocking against wood and glass. She thought of the morning that she had left Boston and her parents. Her grandmother had made bacon and thick, gooey cinnamon French toast sprinkled so heavily with powdered sugar that the slices seemed as though they were a part of the white plate beneath them. Lily couldn't remember the last time her mother had sat down to breakfast with her, but there she was, still dressed in her robe, her hair a mess, but she was there. Lily remembered sitting next to her and thinking how tired she looked. Her parents had kept something from her for a while now, she

knew that. She had heard pieces of their conversations, witnessed the way her mother had seemed unhappy all the time, sick.

The adults talked about things like flight times and layovers and phone calls, while Lily's father served them all orange juice and poured coffee for himself and for her grandmother. He gave Lily her multivitamin, today's happened to be orange, and placed a vitamin in front of her mother, too. It was blue and didn't look chewy.

"No coffee for me?" Edalene asked, as her husband tried to sit down. She gave him the kind of smile that made Lily's stomach twist.

"No, I didn't think you could-"

"Edalene, sweetheart, I could make you decaf," Lily's grandmother said, and Lily felt her mother tense beside her. Her mouth went flat, then thin. She placed her fork back on the table and picked up her glass of orange juice.

"I'm not a child," she said. "I don't want fucking decaf."

The piece of toast in Lily's mouth grew heavy, and she stopped chewing.

"I'm tired and would I like a cup of coffee," Edalene said. She looked at her husband.

"Pour me a cup of coffee, Charlie."

"Edalene, you can't-"

A glass smashed. Lily listened to the break, heard the individual shards hit and scrape across the kitchen floor. She caught her breath and pushed her plate away. She left the table while her parents argued around her, while her grandmother tried to talk them down. She didn't like them fighting. All she wanted was for them all to have breakfast together and say goodbye.

It used to be that breakfast was something they did together every morning. One of her parents would wake up and make something, or at least pull out all of the cereals and juices, and

they would sit together before her parents went to work and she to school. But more and more her parents would fight, and then instead of breakfast together she would wake up to find her father alone in the kitchen. He would tell her, "Your mother had to go to work early," and he would read the paper while Lily ate. Lately, dinnertime had been the same. Her father would give her a similar explanation, "Your mother had to stay late," and they would order Chinese or have leftover pizza.

"Lily, sweetheart, you're bleeding," her mother had said that last time they ate together. Lily looked over her shoulder at her mother. Her head was cocked to the side. Her eyes were big and dark and shiny, like melted dark chocolate, and Lily wondered why her mother was crying. "Lily," she said, "Lily, sweetheart, you're bleeding. Are you listening to me?"

Edalene reached out and shook Lily's shoulder, pulling her back toward the kitchen. Her parents and grandmother were all looking at her. She looked back at them. Her father stood with a dripping dish towel in his hand. At his feet was her mother's spilled orange juice, a yellow pool filled with fluttering broken glass. He looked frightened, and Lily wanted to tell him that it was fine, but something was pushing against her tongue and she couldn't quite move it enough to make words.

"Give me your hand," Edalene said. She took Lily's hand away from her mouth. Part of the thumbnail hung from her finger and blood smeared down her wrist. Lily tasted something bitter.

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry," Edalene said.

"That's okay," Lily said.

Her mother looked at her grandmother, and then down. Lily waited while her mother wrapped her thumb in a paper napkin, and waited more while her father went and came back

with something to clean the wound. He dabbed peroxide onto her thumb, offering a soft *shhh* when she winced at its sting, and her mother placed a bandage over the cut. Her father wiped a cloth across her chin, and when she smiled at him he looked away. When they were done, Lily had pulled her plate back toward her, and had finished her French toast. She had tried not to notice that they were still watching her.

Lily's grandmother hung up the phone, evidently noticing Lily through the glass door to the mudroom. She pushed a strand of grey hair behind her ear and put on a warm smile.

"I didn't see you come in, sweetheart," she said, when Lily opened the door. "Got caught in it?"

"Was that my dad?"

"Sure was. Just making sure you had settled in all right."

She found Lily a towel, and the two of them went through the house together closing the many windows. By dinnertime, the road was nothing more than mud and puddles. Few cars passed by. Sometime after midnight, lightning split the trunk of the big, white mulberry tree. By morning, half the tree stooped over, the brook behind it framed in its shuddering canopy.

Lily sat in her room, a book open in her lap. She had been reading the same page again and again, and still didn't know what had happened. She let herself get caught up in the rain and the way in which it warped everything through the window. Were the sun shining, she would have thought the way the tree was bowing over the frantic waters somehow graceful and beautiful. She tried to imagine the flittering light on the brook, and the way the morning mist would wrap around the roses, creating a charming pink haze not unlike the scene in the old painting that hung in her grandmother's bedroom. She imagined a butterfly would land on a moss-covered stone and wiggle its wings in the sunlight. She saw herself, too, sitting with her

feet in the water, laughing while Jacob splashed her. She felt the cool breeze against her cheeks, and smelled the morning dew.

Something roared and startled Lily—a truck going by, she thought. Still daydreaming, Lily watched as Jacob looked up at her, his brow creased and his eyes questioning. He mouthed something, but she wasn't sure what he was asking her. Water ran down his face now, from his forehead to his chin, but Lily couldn't remember having splashed him quite so much or so high. The sound came again, and she felt the ground beneath her shake. The tree dipped further toward the ground, its leaves drowning in the brook. Jacob ran off. Though she had been so coyly splashing around, Lily stood up, now frightened and alone. She looked upwards and for some reason felt she should shield her eyes. Through the leaves of the mulberry she watched the sky darken and lighten together, listened to the drumming thunder. Then came an explosion of light and she was struck to the ground.

Lily screamed and fell away from the window. Her grandmother raced into the bedroom and, sitting on the floor next to her granddaughter, collected Lily into her arms as though she were four-years-old and not eleven.

"Lily? What is it, sweetheart? Are you afraid of the storm?"

Lily shook her head and pointed out the window to the mulberry tree. Its trunk, which had already been blackened from being struck once in the night, was now smoldering in the rain, struck by lightning a second time. The limb that had hung over the brook now lay across it, creating a detour for the waters that had been building to dangerous levels since the rain had begun.

"Well, look at that," said Lily's grandmother. "Guess you can't believe everything you hear."

The storm took another day to clear. The waters in the brook rose so high and so fast that they ran up and over the road instead of through the conduits beneath it. When Jacob came in the afternoon, already caked in mud, they walked behind the house. The ground beneath them breathed and squelched. Lily told him about the phone call and about the lightning, and they stood in awe beneath the tree. Around them the ground was littered with bark. Jacob grieved for the branch that would have held their swing. They felt the split in the trunk; the scar was deep, the wood bare and black where the lightning had hit, and then startlingly pure and clean where the tree had broken away from itself.

"That's so cool," said Jacob.

"Do you think it will die?" Lily asked.

"I don't know." Jacob shrugged. "Maybe. It's a really strong tree, though."

He climbed onto one of the tree's other great branches as if to prove its strength to himself, or to Lily. The tree creaked beneath his weight but held him. Lily pulled herself up, too, but when Jacob climbed the next branch and continued toward the top, she let herself fall back down and watched. Pieces of bark broke and fell, and Lily just observed and picked at her fingernails.

A truck thundered down the road, whatever assortment of metal and wood that was stuffed into the bed of it clinking and crashing together as it made its way over potholes and dirt. Lily hardly paid it any attention, but Jacob looked over and waved, and the man behind the wheel smiled and waved back. Jacob tottered and caught himself, or seemed to, but suddenly his left foot slipped. Lily gasped and held out her hand, not that it would do him any good where he was. When his right foot slipped, he fell to his knee on the branch. The knee grated against the

bark , ripping a hole in his jeans , and he slid off, down. He tried to grab at the branch, but he fell too fast. His chin collided with the trunk, rocking his head backward, and he tumbled. Lily ran over to him. His legs were folded up beneath him at a strange angle, and blood ran down his face, pooling on his chin and neck.

"Jacob?" she yelled. "Jacob? Are you okay?"

Jacob leapt from his branch and landed with a soft *oomph* next to her. Lily jumped.

"I'm okay. What's wrong?"

"I saw you fall," Lily said .

"What?" Jacob said. He grinned. "You're crazy. You just get so worried every time I'm in that tree, that's all."

"I'm not crazy. I saw you," Lily said. "I saw you fall."

"Lily, I didn't. It's okay," Jacob said. He stopped smiling and reached out for her. His brow creased. "Lily?"

"No, no, no," Lily said. She shook her head and stepped back from him, a twig cracking beneath her foot. "I saw you. Right there. You were dead."

"You're just thinking of that dream," he said, and stepped toward her again. "The one you had during the storm. It's okay."

"It wasn't a dream!" Lily screamed , pushing him away. Jacob stumbled backwards. His foot caught on a rock and he lost his balance, falling away from her and landing on his back.

Lily backed herself farther away, toward the mulberry. She pressed her back into the lightning gap, like a scared child against her mother's legs.

"I-I'm sorry, Jacob," she said. "I didn't mean to-"

Jacob lay still and Lily thought for sure he was dead this time, knew that if she walked over there she would see that his chest wasn't moving. For several minutes all she heard was her own heavy breathing and a bird, somewhere above her, calling out one high note over and over again. She wasn't sure what she should do. She thought she should run to her grandmother and tell her what happened, that it was an accident that Jacob was dead. But she didn't want to get into trouble. What if they said it was her fault? What would happen then? Would she go to jail? She would never see her parents again.

Lily's breathing quickened even more, until she felt she could no longer get enough air into her lungs to feed the demands of her body. She fell on her knees, gulping air, her tears coming fast down her face, mixing with mucus and saliva. She heaved and spit. Twigs and shredded bark dirtied and dug into her palms.

Her grandmother must have seen her from the house. When Lily looked up, she was out the back door and running, running faster than Lily had ever imagined a woman of her age should be able to run. Lily tried to speak, to explain that she hadn't meant to hurt Jacob, but she couldn't say anything and just cried harder. Her grandmother pulled her up and almost crushed her into a hug.

"What? What happened? Come on, stop that now. What happened, Lily?"

Lily shook herself free. She choked down air to slow her breaths, and pointed toward Jacob's still body, only his chucks visible from where he had landed behind the fallen branch.

"I-didn't-he-fell-down-"

"Sweet Jesus."

Lily's grandmother let her go and ran to Jacob. She leaned down with her face next to his and nodded. "Jacob? Darling, can you hear me?"

Jacob groaned but didn't move. Lily's chest tightened and released.

"Okay, Jacob, you're okay. It looks like you bumped your head pretty good. Stay still, I'm going to go get some help." Lily's grandmother stood up and brushed bits of leaves from her knees. She looked at her granddaughter with a mix of fear and disappointment.

"Lily, you stay right there," she said. "I'll be back. I'm going to call the doctor. Right there, you hear me? And make sure he doesn't move."

Her grandmother ran back to the house, just as fast as she had come. Lily watched until she had slipped back inside. Her breathing was coming under control now. She rubbed her face with the back of her arm, and then with her shirt. Jacob moved one of his legs, pulling it up into an arch, and then moved both of his hands onto his stomach. Lily watched them rise and fall. She expected him to get up, to yell at her, but he didn't.

"I'm really sorry, Jacob," she said. He didn't answer. Lily crawled until she was next to him. She petted his hair the way her mother used to when she was sick, first smoothing it over his forehead and then pushing it off to the side. He flinched and made a soft noise when she touched near his temple, and straightened out the leg that had been pulled toward him.

"You'll be okay," Lily said. She looked toward the house, and then behind the brook to the forest that marked the edge of her grandmother's property. She could see nothing beyond the first couple lines of trees. *You could get lost in those woods*, her grandmother had warned. Lily watched Jacob another few seconds and stood up. She dusted off her knees, turned, and took a step toward the woods.

Her Name Meant Purple Flower

We received the call at 6:49 in the morning that Maeve had been in an accident. By 7:01, the four of us were packed into the car and on our way to the hospital, and by 7:13, I was asked to stop for coffee by Mikey, our drummer.

"We're in a rush here-do you really need coffee right now?" My question resulted in not only a yes from Mikey, but a round of mumblings about Dunks, coffee, and my being a caffeine Nazi. I pulled off at the next Dunkin' Donuts, saying, "Fine, but make it quick guys, huh?"

I watched them all stumble into the establishment's glass doors: Mikey, still in a grey t-shirt and rubber duckie pajama pants; Doug, our bass man, who, being dressed completely in black, would probably look like death himself wandering the hallways of the hospital; and finally Randall, who could play the piano with a fierce passion but who otherwise was the dullest person I had ever met. Yes, that was the band. I played guitar and sang lead. The reasons for this are two-fold: one, I thought at the time that the band was forming that these positions would get me the most women-I was wrong-and two, I've always felt that the guitar had a raw, sexy character. And singing, well that was the best way to express anything.

While drops of rain splattered and broke into tributaries on my windshield, I thought of Maeve, our writer. She had graced my life on a rainy day just like this one, right before I'd left my old band. I didn't always remember details as trivial as the weather, but she had walked into the bar we were playing drenched from head to toe, her black hair plastered to her face, wearing what could best be described as a grape dress, which was plastered to, well, things that I had

noticed a little before I had noticed the hair. I was in the middle of "Boys of Summer," a cover of Don Henley's hit, but I kept my eyes on her and called for a five minute break when the song was over so that I could make my move.

"Hey there." I sat down next to her and looked to the bartender, hoping that this would work like it did in the movies: he would instinctively know what I wanted, then slide it down to me without a word. It did not work that way. I asked for a beer, bottled, any kind, then turned back to the girl in the purple dress. "What's your name?"

"Oh, go away," she whined and pulled a pack of cigarettes from her pocket. "I'm cold, I'm wet-I'm miserable, to be honest. And I just don't want to play this game right now."

"You didn't even look at me!" I said. Somehow I thought that that meant something, that maybe if she had looked at me, had seen my green eyes and my deliberately messy hair, she *would* want to play this game. She put the cigarette to her lips and lit it; hers was the same reaction I'd witnessed in every smoker: they inhale that first bit with their eyes closed, and some sort of deep satisfaction just settles into them.

"I didn't look at you? What is that supposed to mean?" I thought she might hit me or something, but she laughed. It was a deep, throaty laugh that erupted from her stomach and made its way up into and out of her mouth. It was a real laugh, and not many people had those. I decided right then and there that I really liked this girl.

"I don't know, honestly," I replied and offered a weak smile. She looked at me and nodded some sort of acceptance.

"Well, I'm Maeve."

"Todd," I told her. "I have to get back up on stage-stick around?" I got up from my stool and edged back from the bar.

She seemed to mull it over. "Just for a chat?" she asked.

It was hard to imagine that that had been over six years ago. Though I had been trying not to, I started to wonder about life without Maeve when Doug pounded on the windshield. "Todd. Todd! Snap out of it, man, it's cold out here!"

Startled, I sank back in my seat and looked at Doug. He glared in through the front passenger window, his now wet Dunkin' Donuts bag clutched in his hand. I hadn't realized the doors were locked. I hit the button and they all rushed in.

"What the fuck, man? You do not deserve the coffee I got you," Mikey said, handing it over nevertheless.

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An hour later we were all sitting in the waiting room. The doctors had said what they always did-she was injured badly and had been sent to the operating room. They were doing what they could. While the guys watched TV, I thought back to my twenty-fourth birthday. It had just been Maeve and I, chatting about life over cheap Chinese food.

"I'm going to be great someday, you know," I had told her. "Famous. I've planned on it all my life-I want my music to be heard."

"Based on what I've seen, you're gonna be another sad piece of trash ripping off someone else's hits and turning them into complete shit," Maeve replied. It was this degree of honesty that I admired most about her. As much as it might sting now and again, she had a way of saying what was on her mind that could just blow you away. If a person didn't know that she did it out of love, it could have really burned. But by then, I knew.

"Well, thank you," I said, and countered by flinging a few grains of fried rice at her. "I can't help that I'm not great with lyrics. When I sit down and start writing, I realize that it's all

been written. And the guys are worse than I am ." By this time I was with Mikey , Doug , and Randall, and so far we had had to stick to covers to keep a crowd.

"I can 't believe I'm going to say this, but it's your birthday so I will." Maeve's face became very serious, and she paused to take an exaggerated deep breath, as though about to reveal the secret to everything. At last, she said, "I'll help you write." It really wasn 't as profound as the secret to everything, I guess, but to me it may as well have been. Maeve had studied poetry in college, and when she had felt there was nothing more she could learn from a privileged life, she had dropped out. Just like that, as though it had been no big deal. Her parents had disapproved, and so she had moved out of her their middle-class suburban home into a crummy studio apartment. Since then she has been determined to experience as many places and people as possible. Because of it, her writing was strong and raw. It had emotion. It had meaning. It had purpose. Everything that mine lacked.

I was about to express my profound gratitude, by getting on the ground and bowing to her, but she shushed me. "No, wait. You have to promise me something; you have to be more serious about this." I nodded along and drew an 'x ' across my heart . Maeve rolled her eyes. Classic. "You tell me all the time that music means everything to you , but you're stuck in bars , playing songs that were great before you guys got ahold of them. You want your music to be heard and you don't even have any originals to offer-nothing that's truly yours ."

"Yes, yes, I know!" I exclaimed , my voice reaching a pitch I wasn't aware it could reach . "But we will now. I'll write the music-you can write the lyrics. I will sing them-you will get all of the credit. We will be great. I see it." I spread my arms to show I was very excited. But I pulled them down; if we were going to be spending all of this extra time together , there was one

problem. "You should quit smoking," I told Maeve. Seeing her disapproving glare, I leaned in and whispered, "It's bad for you."

"So are a lot of things, Todd. But no one tells me to quit any of them." Maeve had heard my anti-smoking talks before. I could start my own campaign with the hours of information I could spew about health issues, but Maeve knew that when it all came down to it, I was selfish and just didn't like the way the smoke made my nose itch. "To be honest," she told me, "I figure that life is just as bad for me as smoking, so it's all balanced. Either the smoking kills me and saves me from life, or life kills me and saves me from smoking." It was the same response I'd heard a thousand times before. As an afterthought she added, "Me, personally, I'm betting it'll be life that gets me first."

"Well, happy birthday to me."

"Oh shut up, Todd; let's get down to business here. I think you need to be reminded of why you love music so much; it sure as hell wasn't for the money or fame in the beginning."

"I know why I love music, Maeve, it's my life."

"I don't think you know what your life is, or why you love it." She dragged me over to the jukebox and put on the B-52s "Love Shack," which I am ashamed to say was one of our favorite songs to sing along to. "Come on, Todd, sing with me."

At first I didn't want to-people were staring-but eventually I couldn't help it. Maeve was shouting out, "*Bang, bang, bang-on the door, baby!*" and I had to join in. She smiled at me, and then the people smiled, and then I felt that strange little warmth in my stomach. My arms and legs started to move; I could feel the music in every bit of my body, and I loved that feeling. I imagined that it was probably the same feeling heroin addicts got when what they had injected finally reached their blood and filled them.

It was then that I took Maeve's advice to become more serious about my own music. It was also then that I decided to commit to Mikey, Doug, and Randall, rather than hop from band to band , always hoping that by the time I got there, the hard work would already be done. More importantly, though, it was then that I had come to appreciate that Maeve was not only my muse, but my best friend, doing her best to draw out whatever talent in me she thought I was hiding .

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Shortly after lunch, a doctor finally came to tell us what happened. "Police are estimating that she crashed sometime around four this morning , most likely due to decreased visibility in the rain and the conditions of the roads," he explained. "Luckily for her , some passersby saw the accident and called for an ambulance right away. When she was brought to us, she had severe damage to her intestines, probably because of a seat-belt, and that had caused some internal bleeding that we needed to get under control."

The doctor paused to let his words sink in. "When she came in, she was still awake and asked us to call you. We've tried getting a hold of any family, but no luck yet."

"She doesn't have family." Mikey , who had been silent since we arrived , spoke up. "Well, she does, but they wouldn't give a damn-not l ike we would. We're family." We all nodded.

The doctor sighed. "She's in the ICU, but if you would like to see her, I suppose I could permit it. Only two at a time, and only for a few minutes."

We were led through the intensive care unit's hallway of closed doors to where Maeve was resting. Mikey and I were the first in, though he didn't want to be . He was dealing with this in his own way , but it was a bit much for him. I told him that it would be good for Maeve to see us . With reluctance he followed me, then left after saying a quick hello and kissing her forehead.

Not knowing exactly what a person said to someone who had just been in a car accident, I asked the stupid question.

"I'm great, Todd," Maeve answered. "I'm getting a kick out of all these machines." Her voice was softer than usual, sluggish even, and her words slurred. Even though she tried to seem herself, she watched me through half-hooded eyes, and all I could see was fear.

"Well, you look like shit." I said it to try and lighten things up, but she did look like shit. Who wouldn't after a car accident--or surgery for that matter? That is, of course, apart from the big name celebs, whose surgeries would probably not be accident related.

"I've been thinking that this situation could benefit you."

"Really. And how is that?" I asked, and she gave me a look that implied I should already know the answer. I shrugged. "What?"

"You could get some material out of this. Do some kind of 'Last Kiss' sort of thing."

I stood and turned away from her. Her candid nature being what it was, I could usually withstand whatever Maeve said to me. But now I paced the horseshoe around her bed, rubbing at the vulnerability growing in my stomach. "First of all, you're not going to die--the doctors said that they've fixed all of your broken insides, with the exception of your ever-blackening heart." I took a breath and let myself sink toward her, pressing my forehead against hers. "And second, don't say shit like that--you're my best friend."

She waved me off. "Yes, Todd, and that is why I promised to help you write. This is my contribution, use it to get famous." Maeve chuckled at what I'm sure was a look of horror on my face. "Songs about girls dying definitely get a reaction," she declared, and for some reason I felt that maybe, deep down, she was being serious.

"You're pissing me off," I told her, and watched her just nod as the doctor came in and told me my time was up. Like Mikey, I kissed her forehead. "I love you, Maeve. I'll be back."

"I know."

I walked out and turned left, away from the waiting room. Maeve's brutal honesty was nothing new; I had even come to appreciate the way it tore through my very being. She was the only person that could affect me this way, the only person who had ever inspired me to take the truth for what it was and turn it into something better. Once, after I had shown her one of the first songs I had written on my own and she had ripped it apart, Maeve had told me, "Be happy that I'm offering an opinion, because when people stop reacting to what you're playing, or singing, that's when you have a real problem, Todd. If people don't care enough, even to tell you that it's complete shit, that's when something is wrong."

I had replied as I often did-childishly. "I cannot believe you just told me that my way of expressing my emotions-no, no, my soul!-sucks." We were in the middle of Daddy's Junky Music, arguing about my latest song, a song that Maeve had said should be burned, buried, and stomped on. I had written about an ex-girlfriend who had walked out on me. She was a little younger, materialistic, and had left because she was frustrated that I hadn't written a song about her yet. I felt that the irony of the situation made for a fantastic piece.

"Oh, how dramatic we are," Maeve drawled. "I'm not telling you that your art in general sucks, I am telling you that this one piece in particular needs work." She stopped only to place her hand on my shoulder, no doubt to ease the wounded-puppy look. "If you aren't ready for your work to be judged, you shouldn't put it out there. Your music may express your soul, or whatever, but that's what makes it art. And its being art means that it is going to be judged."

"I didn't say people couldn't judge it, Maeve," I retorted. I wondered if she had any idea how hard it was for me to write down all that I was feeling for everyone to see, just to have her take my notes, light a cigarette, and start burning holes in them. It had taken me weeks to get that song right-the right music, the right words-the entire atmosphere of it had changed about seven times in the process. I found her reaction completely uninspiring, and even a little rude. "I simply said that I didn't want bad judgment."

She laughed. I didn't understand why she found it so funny that I was twenty-six and going nowhere with my life. I had lost my girlfriend, the guys and I had very few gigs-which meant no money-and the one song that I'd written by myself since we met, she put down. I was realizing why so many bands broke up--too much pressure. "Your problem is that you never feel anything real," she said. "You write about the surface emotions. Hell, you only talk about the surface emotions. Everything in your heart is kept to you. You need to go deeper, and not just with your music."

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By seven that evening the guys had gone home, and I was alone in the waiting room watching Star Trek: The Next Generation reruns and eating stale Cheetos from a vending machine. Maeve was still sleeping, but the doctor said that that was normal, and he wouldn't be surprised if she slept through the night. "She needs her rest, after all." He had insisted that I go and get some rest myself, but I wanted to stay in case she woke.

One of the nurses appeared from behind her desk, out of uniform and dressed for home. I had seen her going in and out of Maeve's room all day, but now I guess it was time for someone else take over. "So, you're the boyfriend, then?" she asked.

"What? Me? Oh, no. Just the friend. Always the friend," I told her, and gave her one of

those sort-of half smiles-you know, where you don't really mean it, but feel you have to at least

put in some effort to be nice. I was tired , and the last thing I wanted to be doing was having one of these conversations.

"Well , you're a pretty special friend to have stayed while the others took off."

"Maeve is a special person," was all I could think to say. It sounded stupid out loud, not because it wasn't true, but because it was so obvious. No one could meet Maeve and think she wasn't special, it was impossible . She was quirky , and curious, and interesting, and lovely. And she had the best laugh , one that you couldn't help loving.

The nurse smiled and nodded, then bade me goodnight as she hurried off. I watched the other nurse go from room to room, checking on the patients freshly under her care. From each one she would come, shut the door quietly, then smile or shake her head. When she ventured in to check on Maeve I watched her from the edge of my seat to see what she would do. She shook her head.

"Are you Todd?" she asked, and I nodded . "She would like to see you."

I crept over to Maeve's door. It was dark but for a tiny lamp in the corner, and I was careful as I made my way to the chair. She looked worse now, and while I knew she had been pumped full of drugs, it was discomfoting to see her so pale. I waited to speak until she opened her eyes. "Hullo, Maeve. Did you sleep good?"

She managed a "mmhmm" before yawning and closing her eyes again. I let my elbows sink into the softness of her bed and reached over for her hand. It was clammy, and felt weightless and small without the array of rings that usually adorned it.

"You came back," she said quietly. "Where are the guys?"

"At home. Mike didn't really like it here."

"Oh," she mumbled, and tugged her hand from mine to scratch at a cut on her nose. When I nudged her fingers away, she whined about it being itchy and pouted. I called her a baby, she called me a prick.

"You didn't say you loved me back, Maeve. Broke my heart. Guess I know what that means." I smiled at her. Weakly, she stuck out the tip of her tongue. As the drugs really kicked in, I could see her drifting more and more back toward sleep, and as much as I wanted to keep her awake, I had to let her go.

"I love you, Todd. Go home."

"I love you, too, Maeve." I kissed her hand and tucked the covers around her before I left.

Maeve died the next morning. The doctor said that there had been an aortic aneurysm that they were unaware of, and that it had ruptured, killing her almost instantly. When they let me see her, I held her hand in mine, and cried. Somewhere I imagined her standing, hands on her hips, saying, "And you said the cigarettes would kill me," before breaking into one of her throaty laughs.

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I followed the guys onto the stage. It was our first performance since our EP had been released, and instead of playing from the sectioned off part of some small bar, we had nabbed a gig at a university. We all knew it was a step up, but I didn't feel that rush of change until I stood there, on a properly constructed stage in front of hundreds of people. And then I understood what Maeve had been trying to get me to see all along: that it wasn't about whether or not the band made it big, it was about cherishing the moments like this one, the moments that if we ever did make it big, we wouldn't get back.

I strode up to the microphone. Silence washed over the room, and I took a deep breath

and waited, letting the anticipation grow. "This song is about a good friend of mine that passed away a couple of years ago." I strummed the first chord, and waited out a series of impressive whistles from the back before concluding, "It's called, 'Her Name Meant Purple Flower.'"

With that, the silence burst. I smiled at the screams and the cheers, realizing that they already knew the song.

Resurrection

While Frank was waiting for his wife to fill each of the several bird feeders that adorned their garden and backyard, he glanced in the direction of a particular plant that had died a few weeks prior. It was something special-he forgot the name-a flowering plant Ella had put in a couple years before, just after he had retired. It had never bloomed. This year, when leaves had formed on it, she'd gotten all excited and made him come out to look at it. Now the ground was almost bare, but Ella had placed her gardening gloves on the spot, marking an intention to work that area.

"Ella, what are you doing over there?" he asked. She had only two feeders left to fill.

"All that rain and wind we had this week left a lot of debris around. I just want to make sure the ladies," she nodded to the area that Frank was looking at, "aren't suffocating. "

"The plant is dead. Saw it not too long ago. Why don't you rip it up and plant something else there?"

Ella panted and handed her husband the hummingbird feeder, then started to fill the last one. "It's not dead, Frank. That's just the way of these lilies-it's what they do when they're getting ready to flower."

"Come off it. You planted that thing two years ago and not once has it flowered. Then a few weeks back the stupid thing dries up and dies." Frank lifted himself up a couple of rungs on his ladder to secure the feeder on one of the lower tree branches. "All that shit about planting it at the proper depth and watering it the right amount and whatever else it is you do out here, and all

that thing did was produce a few leaves before shriveling into the ground. Know when to say when, for crying out loud."

The words came out rougher than he had meant ; Frank had been in a mood for most of the morning and had taken it out on a poor young stock boy at the gardening center. Usually Ella would just roll her eyes and let him have his moods, but this time she turned to him, angry.

"That 's just your way , isn't it?" she said. "If something isn 't worki ng the way you want it to, just give up. You listen to me, Frank Reed. This is *my* garden. / know how it works. I know when a plant 's dead and when it just needs a little time to figure itself out. This baby here flowers when it wants to, not when you-when you fucking say so!"

Frank was taken aback. His wife was known for her sharp tongue, but in their nearly forty-three years of marriage , he could remember only rare occasions on which that tongue spit out anything worse than "damn."

"That's a load of shit and you know it," he argued. "You're just too damn stubborn to dig it up because you want to prove me wrong. Well , fine! You just let it rot in the ground there ."

"No , Frank, you 're too stubborn."

Frank noticed that her tone had gone from exasperated and angry to sad.

"You've always been too stubborn," she said. "Too goddamn stubborn to realize that sometimes the shit in this life, well it takes work to keep it alive, it takes nurturing , care, *love*."

Frank knew she wasn't talking about the plant anymore and decided not to respond. He took the second feeder from her, hung it from the comer of their garage, and retreated inside to watch the Red Sox play the A's. A few hours later, after the game had ended and Frank had resorted to the *Leader* , Ella came in to say she was almost done and would be in shortly to cook dinner, did Frank want anything in particular, no.

Frank was still in the living room reading his newspaper a good while later. Above the television, the wall clock—a kitschy little thing that Ella had bought at the town's fair—opened its door and vomited a pink metal bird that began to chirp the hour: *chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp*. Frank removed his reading glasses and glared at it. He marveled that a woman who, before they had been married, had dreamed of and idolized sophisticated, classic design trends, had later come to be lured in by something as trite as a powder-blue and pink cuckoo clock, that she would replace glass candleholders with painted tin cans with hearts cut out of them.

Placing the *Leader* on the arm of his chair, Frank stood and stretched and walked to a large window that looked out on the garden. Fifty minutes had passed since Ella had said she'd be in in five. Frank leaned down and pushed against the window screen with his nose—he couldn't see his wife and knew she was crouched under some flower or bush, weeding out invaders or clearing away dead leaves. He yelled out, "Ella? Ella! You've been out there all afternoon, get in here already." With a tone of concern, he added, "You're getting too much sun. And we haven't eaten yet!"

Receiving no response, Frank shook his head and pulled away from the window. "Damn woman can't hear anything anymore." Grumbling, he went out the back door. Ella's straw gardening hat was upside-down next to the Crimson Maple around which the rest of the garden revolved. "Ella, come—"

As he rounded the tree, Frank stopped short. His wife was sitting on the ground with her legs tucked in toward her body and her arms limp in front of her. "What the hell are you doing?" Frank knelt. Ella's face was relaxed, even drowsy. Her lips were parted and wet, with saliva starting to leak from her frown. Frank brushed it away with his sleeve. Though her eyelids were

almost closed, he was sure Ella was looking at him. She mumbled something that he couldn't understand and her left hand flinched.

"Can you lift that arm up for me?"

If she could, she didn't. Frank asked her to tell him how long she had been that way, but she didn't do that either. He reached out for her arm and lifted it himself, then let go. It fell without resistance. He lifted her face toward his and asked her again how long she'd been out there. When she still didn't respond, he ran inside and called 9-1-1.

By the time paramedics arrived, Ella was unconscious and her breathing had become light and raspy. While one paramedic checked Ella's vitals, another launched a series of questions at Frank: what symptoms Ella had displayed before passing out, when did he last see her in a normal condition, was she on any medications, could he detail a brief medical history? Frank answered and nodded and shook his head when he needed to, then watched when Ella was placed on a gurney and into the ambulance. One of the paramedics had covered her face with an oxygen mask. Frank heard a lot of words flung around, words like stroke, blood pressure, unresponsive. One of the paramedics asked if he would like to ride with them, but he said he would take his truck.

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The emergency room smelled like shit, blood, plastic, and ammonia. Underneath it all, Frank thought he could detect traces of Chanel No. 19, too, his wife's favorite fragrance for thirty-some-odd years. A tech stopped to ask if he would like a cup of water. Frank shook his head and walked outside to wait for Lisa and David. He had called his daughter on the way. She said she would call her brother and that they would meet him there as soon as they could.

Frank didn't really didn't want the kids there, but he'd have felt guilty if something happened to Ella and he hadn't given them the chance to see her. But he didn't want to deal with

all that they would bring with them: the questions he couldn't answer, and the tears, and the fear. No, he couldn't deal with the fear.

"Dad!" Lisa rushed up to him and enveloped him in a hug, then stepped back and grabbed his shoulders. "How is she? What's going on?"

"They haven't told me anything yet," Frank explained and freed himself from his daughter's grasp. "They took all of her vitals, you know, blood pressure and all that stuff, in the ambulance and again when she got here. Took some blood tests, too. She's getting an MRI now."

David, unnoticed by Frank because of Lisa's abrupt greeting, shuffled his feet and whispered, "Jesus."

Frank said hello to his son and stuck out his hand. David shook it and returned his hand to his pocket. They looked like Frank, both of them. There were faint traces of Ella there, usually just glimpses when one of them laughed, but overall they looked like Frank had when he was younger—dark hair, dark eyes, thin lips, and smooth skin. Just about the same height, too.

All three stood in an awkward silence until another ambulance came in and Frank asked if the two would like to sit inside instead. It was a long time before the doctor, a woman who had seen Ella when she was initially brought in, came out to introduce herself to Lisa and David and update Frank.

"Your wife suffered a massive brainstem stroke, Mr. Reed." The doctor tucked the chart she'd been carrying under her arm. "It's the reason why when you asked your wife questions and to move her arm she was unable to respond—we refer to it as 'Locked-In Syndrome.' The continued lack of oxygen to her brain caused her to go unconscious. She has since slipped into a coma, and we've had to place her on a ventilator." Frank heard someone gasp, probably Lisa.

"At this point we can tell you nothing with any certainty with regards to recovery," the doctor explained. "We'll need to observe her brain function over the next couple of weeks to know what sort of quality of life she'll be able to lead after this, if any. Best case scenario, she'll wake up and need some physical therapy to regain motor control. However, it's important that you understand there is a very good chance that even if she does wake up, she won't walk or talk again. She could need round-the-clock care."

The doctor paused to allow time for this to sink in. She looked at Frank, and he felt sure he was under some kind of assessment. "Mr. Reed," the doctor resumed, "there's also the chance that she'll remain unresponsive and you'll need to decide then what you want to do."

From behind him, Lisa asked, "What do you mean what he wants to do?" He'd forgotten the kids were there, too.

The doctor pursed her lips. What an unattractive expression, Frank thought.

She cleared her throat. "If the patient doesn't wake up and we see no change in her brain activity over the course of a few weeks," the woman explained, "then we will ask the family to consider whether to take her off of life support."

Frank felt his stomach crawl into his throat. He swallowed, pushing it back down. He wondered if Lisa or David had noticed the doctor's sudden and distancing use of "the patient" and "the family," as though she were telling them about someone else's case. Maybe, he thought, she was. Maybe a mistake had been made and Ella was just fine.

"Mr. Reed, right now I suggest you and your family go home and rest. There's nothing you can do tonight."

Frank was reeled back into reality.

"We'll do our best to make her comfortable," the doctor said.

When the doctor walked away, he turned to Lisa and David. He straightened himself up as best he could, though he couldn't help but feel that somehow the two of them were standing above him. "Well, uh, you heard her--you two should get home to your kids."

David remained silent and still, but Lisa reached her arms around Frank and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She knew better than to offer to stay or to ask Frank how he was feeling. "I'll come over and make dinner for you tomorrow, okay? Davey 'll come too, won't you?" She looked at her brother with damp, shimmering eyes.

David nodded.

"I love you, Daddy," said Lisa.

"Yep, okay," said Frank and stepped back from her. "Drive safe, all right? You too, David."

Frank waited until the kids had been gone a few minutes before putting on his coat and heading out to his truck.

The following morning Frank called the hospital.

"She's still unresponsive, Mr. Reed," a nurse told him.

Frank sat down to read the paper and drink his coffee alone. He never got to read the paper in the morning, because Ella always insisted on sitting down to breakfast together and talking at him about the neighbors, or their grandchildren, or some ridiculous reality show she had made him watch the night before. He always read the paper in the afternoons instead, when she was out in the garden. But today he got to read the paper in the morning.

The realization that he was almost appreciative of this development change made Frank uncomfortable and he shifted in his chair. Of course he was worried, he told himself. But the

doctor had said there was nothing he could do for Ella right now , hadn 't she? If I weren 't here,

Frank reasoned , Ella would probably have made herself some pancakes and then gone straight into the garden to check on her plants. But it isn't just that she isn't here this morning, he reminded himself. She isn't here because she's in the hospital. She's in the hospital and she may never wake up . She's in the hospital, and even if she does wake up, she may need someone to take care of her every day for the rest of her life-to move her, to feed her, to help her go to the bathroom and clean up her shit afterward .

Frank 's hands were clenched around the paper , folding it in upon itself. All of a sudden he was angry at himself for not knowing who had been kicked off of *Hell 's Kitchen* so he could tell Ella when she came home. He was angry that he hadn't spent more time with her in the garden and that he'd had such a stupid argument with her about how much time she had spent taking care of a plant-

Frank threw his paper down onto the breakfast table. That damn plant , he thought. If she hadn 't been so focused on caring for that damn plant, she wouldn 't have been out in the garden so long.

The doorbell rang. Frank hesitated. He had made up his mind and didn't want the distraction of whoever was on the other side of that door. It rang again and then a third time. Frank heaved himself up and walked over. "What?" he said, as he threw it open, expecting one of the neighbors again, sharing their sympathies with him. How they had all found out so quickly about his wife 's being in the hospital was beyond him. Gossips.

But it wasn't a neighbor, it was David. He stood with his weight on his heels and his hands held behind his back-more like a kid than a grown man.

"Oh , it's you," Frank said.

"Hi, Dad, I just thought I'd stop in and see how-"

"What?" said Frank. "Speak up for Christ's sake." His son's voice was so soft, almost melodic, like Ella's. Frank had never been able to stand it. He didn't like having to work to hear a person. Even when the boy was a child, whether he was happy or sad, David had talked just above a whisper, as though he were afraid whoever he was talking to would shatter if he raised his voice in the slightest. Frank was always having to bend down and have him repeat himself. Thinking back, Frank could really remember only a couple of occasions when his son had actually raised his voice in an argument.

Were the circumstances of David's visit different, such memories may have made Frank smile, a prideful curve of the lips-that's when a man becomes his own man, he always thought, those moments when a son finally asserts himself to his father-but now the thought of those arguments irritated Frank.

"I came by to see how you were doing, if you needed to talk about anything," said David, raising his voice.

Frank tried to think of the last time he had spent time with either David or Lisa alone, without Ella. It must have been David's seventeenth birthday. Ella had gone down to Florida to care for her mother after her father had died, but she had insisted that Frank still take the kids out for the traditional family birthday dinner at Macon's Bistro in town. He thought of her having called to coach him over the phone that morning.

"Make sure David knows how much I hate not being there, won't you?" Ella had pleaded. "And Jesus Christ, Frank, don't you yell at him," she chided, her voice still soft, but stronger, more insistent. "He's sensitive."

Frank rolled his eyes. He resented the insinuation that he ever planned on yelling at the boy, and resented more that Ella always was quick to side with her son and not her husband.

Didn't she know yet that Frank had always had his children's best interests in mind? He was doing what he could for both of them. When he had been eighteen, he had enlisted. It wasn't like he was asking for David to join the Corps or anything. "You know I don 't like to yell at him, but damn, Ella-sometimes he just gets to me. He's so, I don't know, passive, lazy. It 's time that

boy grew a backbone."

"Well, you're not growing it for him on his birthday, Frank. Let him be! Enjoy spending time with your son before it's his eighteenth birthday and he's moving out of the house." Frank could hear the frown that had come to his wife's lips. After a moment of quiet thought, Ella had added, "We barely hear from Lisa anymore. I'm surprised she even made time to come tonight. "

Frank didn 't mind so much that they never heard from their daughter . He was proud that she was pursuing a life independent of the family.

"But think about that day, Ella, when it's just you and me." He smiled. "No more Chachi, no more of that punk shit streaming out of the garage, and I won't have to deal with that hunk of junk car of his roughing up my lawn because he can't park it properly in the driveway." Frank was euphoric. It wasn't that he didn't love his children. He had enjoyed holding them when they were born and, when they were a few years older, letting them ride on his back while they squealed and screamed, "Giddyap! Giddyap!" He enjoyed more watching them grow and havi ng to learn when to protect them and when to let them figure out things for themselves. But Frank had never been shy in admitting that he couldn 't wait for the day that he had his wife to himself again. Ella had been right in what she had said about him-he had never been one for nurturing.

Ella laughed. "Frank, I think that *Happy Days* ended last year, and you're the one who helped him to buy that hunk of junk."

"You know what I'm saying. It'll be you and me again."

"I know, baby."

Now, Frank sighed, standing there with his grown son. God, she'd had a great laugh then. When did she stop laughing like that, he wondered.

"I'm fine!" Frank growled at David. He stepped aside, though, and allowed David into the house. As they made their way back to the kitchen, Frank glared out the window into the garden, waving his hand toward the mess of greens and oranges and yellows that was his backyard. "I want to get that plant up before she comes home. Thing's dead! She shouldn't have been out there with it."

"What plant?" David asked.

"You know, that one that she got a while back that never bloomed."

David peered out the window. "You can't just rip it up, Dad. She would be sad to see it gone if she-when she makes it out of this."

Frank hugged the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger and squeezed hard enough that the tips of his nails paled. The building pressure in his head eased, though only a little. It was something he had watched his own father do over and over again whenever one of his children was bothering him with something so insignificant. Frank couldn't remember when he'd adapted the habit and dropped his hand.

"Look, David," he said, his own voice now much lower, though still with an underlying edginess. "*If* she comes home, and *if* she even knows what a plant is, I doubt she's going to have the energy to give a shit about one of them missing."

David stared at his father for what seemed a long time. Frank tried to tell if his son was sad or angry. Uncomfortable, he cleared his throat.

"It's okay to be sad, you know," David said, his voice low again.

Frank looked away from him and out to the garden again. The plant was hidden behind the maple, next to pink rose bushes that he was sure always bloomed on time, every year. He shook his head and under his breath whispered, "Pitiful." In another hour or so the sun would creep into that corner. If he was going to rip it out of there, Frank wanted to do it before then.

"You want to help or what? Your sister isn't going to be here for another while yet," Frank said. He opened the door to the yard, and the two of them went to the garage. David protested again, but only a little. Frank grabbed a shovel from the garage and carried it toward the plant. Ella's gardening hat was still overturned next to the maple. Frank bent over to pick it up, but stopped.

Frank dropped the shovel and forgot about the hat. He staggered toward the plant and fell on his knees onto the ground before it. Where he had remembered there being a mound of dry, browning foliage only a few weeks before there now grew stalks of a vibrant green that overwhelmed the rest of the garden, which, worn from the hot summer sun, had begun fading into fall. Bulbs cracked open from the top of each stalk, giving way to a warm fuchsia that looked anxious to bloom.

Frank reached toward the bulbs but stayed his hand just shy of them, afraid that if he were to touch one then they would all wither away in front of him.

"Well, look at that," he said.

"I thought it was dead," David said.

Frank wanted to stand, to run inside and find Ella and bring her out to see that she was right-he didn't even mind admitting it this time-that the plant hadn't been dead, or maybe that it had been dead and she had brought it back to life. That was it, he knew-his wife, with her stubbornness, her unwillingness to ever give up, and her persistent care, had brought this flower

back to life. He knew she'd shake her head at him and say, "I told you, Frank Reed! I *told* you." And then she'd laugh that hearty laugh, the one he hadn't heard in such a long time .

But he remembered then his wife's still body , how small and grey she looked in her hospital bed , how his skin had prickled when he first saw the tube feeding into her mouth, obstructing her throat, and preventing that laugh from being heard. He felt his stomach launch into his mouth again, and instead of forcing it back down, this time he opened his lips for it to escape. But instead of his stomach, Frank was surprised to hear his own cry of, "Oh God!"

David wrapped his arm around his father's thinning shoulders. Frank hung his head , and , though his son probably believed that he was crying out of sadness for himself that his wife might die, Frank cried out of pity for her that she had been right, that he was not a caring or kind man, not a nurturing one. Because he knew, with that beautiful pink bud, that if he were the one facing death instead of her , she would find a way to bring him back to life.

A Walk

This morning they wake up in separate beds. He no longer reaches for her the way he used to, so he gets up and doesn't even notice that she's not there. She is across town, lying next to someone who in the mornings does reach for her, and when he does so today, she curves her naked body into his and rests her face against his neck. She inhales the lingering scents of cedar and citrus from his cologne and pretends that she is in her own bed with the man she met five years ago and that they are still happy. She is careful not to confuse this man with the man who left her one day to go to work and came back a stranger who doesn't talk to her and who doesn't look at her when they have sex.

An hour later, he is out of the shower and wrapping himself with a towel when the apartment door closes and her keys clatter as they smack the kitchen table. The lock clicks and he stops to listen while she scrapes one of the wooden chairs across the floor. He forgets what she was wearing the morning before, but is afraid to leave the bathroom and recognize it's the same outfit. He waits several minutes and watches water run down his legs, pool around his feet and onto the tile. The color of the tiles reminds him of blood, and he remembers when they first looked at the apartment the way she squealed, "Babe-they're *incarnadine!*" They both laughed at the word, and the landlord cocked his head at the tiles, then at the couple laughing, and asked whether or not they wanted the place.

When he walks out of the bathroom, she has her head cradled in her arms on the kitchen table. She's very still, and he thinks that maybe she's asleep, and that maybe the reason she's asleep is that another man kept her up all night. He imagines her twisting and panting underneath

someone with hair thicker and darker than his, someone with a deeper voice and bigger hands . It's not like he doesn't know there's another; she's not shy about her affair, nor is she sorry. He's not startled to find that the idea of her being in bed with someone else triggers less sorrow than does her not being sorry for it.

She lifts her head to find him staring. His eyes are unfocused , and she realizes that he is not looking at her, but through her to something else. She frowns, too familiar with the gaze, and her eyes fill with tears. When she needs to be somewhere else for a while , she leaves so he doesn't have to see her. But he stays so she has to witness his body becoming an empty shell and his mind carrying him elsewhere. She calls him back now and watches as recognition sinks into him . His eyes focus on her for the first time in a long while, but he says nothing about her wet cheeks.

"Let's go for a walk?" she asks, and he nods. She slips her coat and gloves back on while she waits for him to dress, then together they walk from their apartment , down two flights of stairs and onto an empty street. They live outside the downtown area, are removed from the busy flow of people making their ways up and down the brick streets of the walking mall, in and out of charming shops. She was already downtown this morning, and walks in the opposite direction. Her strides are long and quick , and he paces himself to stay beside her, wondering if they appear like any ordinary couple to those who pass them.

"Where are we going?" he wonders out loud. She wonders the same herself , but doesn't say so. She turns left, left, right, left, into a wooded park , leading him onto a rise that overlooks the train tracks. They used to walk here all the time-it was their favorite part of the city-but he realizes they haven't been here together in over a year. The area has been further developed since he last saw it; there are more flowerbeds and a pond. Two willow

trees, pale and heavy with

frost, drape themselves across the public garden, lending a majestic air to an otherwise simplistic landscape. From one of the willows hangs a tire swing. On the far side of the garden, a rusted steel railing guards against the rock face that slants down toward the railroad.

She walks along the gravel path, undaunted by what is new to him, and he knows she has come here without him many times. The thought rubs him the wrong way, and he allows himself to fall a step behind her, sulking. She doesn't notice, and stops to seat herself on a granite bench close to the railing so she can watch the tracks. Dirt rubs off onto her cream coat, but she doesn't see or doesn't mind. Something is building inside her. She motions for him to sit. When he does, she looks at him and asks, "Do you still love me?"

She knows right away that she doesn't want his reply-the answer is a complicated one. His mouth contorts, as though trying to form a response, but never opens. She lowers her eyes from his. She's not sure she would know what to say either, if he had been the one to ask. He considers reaching for her hand, and does, but she's looking away from him now and he lets his hand drop before it touches hers.

"Listen," she says, and twists away from him to face the oncoming train. Together, they watch the train crawl toward them and then away again. Their silence is louder than the cracking of the wheels against the track, but neither is able to speak. They watch long after the train has disappeared, sucked into a hole on the horizon that neither of them can see. They watch until the sun starts to fall into that same hole.

The Awakeners

Anna had yet to get out of her car. She had yet to even let her hands slip from their 10-2 position on the wheel. She listened to the gentle hum of her engine, to her keys softly clinking against the steering column, and thought of how easy it would be to turn her headlights back on, throw the Altima into gear, and get home in time to slip into pajamas and watch *Survivor* and *Modern Family*. She had been idling in the lot behind the Littleton Community Center for ten minutes, too anxious to go in and face what awaited her.

For five weeks Anna had been attending the center's newly formed grief support group. Every Wednesday night from seven to nine, she and six other people sat in a circle, chaperoned by a certified grief counselor employed by Littleton General Hospital. Guided by her prompts and gentle demeanor, they shared in each others' anguish. Though Anna had bonded with the others and felt compelled to offer comfort and words of support each week, and though she in return was comforted by their camaraderie and compassion, she had opted to pass each time she was asked if she would like to share her own experiences.

Anna's son had been dead for eight months, but she still had difficulty talking about what happened. Only her close friends and family knew the details, knew the circumstances in which Matthew had died, knew the trouble he had been mixed up in. They all judged him, judged her, too, and so whenever someone tried to talk about what had happened to her son, she said no, she couldn't think about it, thank you. The group had seemed to be a blessing. Hesitant though she was to attend the first meeting, there was something about unloading her emotions onto strangers, a certain freedom in their ignorance of her and her son, that appealed to Anna, and she

had gone nevertheless. But when others had started talking about the passing of their loved ones, when Anna heard how-ordinary-their deaths all seemed, she had clammed up again.

But Anna had said at the end of the last meeting that she would like to try to talk about Matthew this week, to tell his story, and after having had lunch with one of the group's members on Saturday, she had been sure she was ready.

Hollie, the youngest member of group, had been brave enough to share her story with everyone at the second meeting. She had been married just over two years, and in that time had suffered through three miscarriages, the latest only a few weeks before the group's start. Anna had run into her at the bank and, after chatting over a couple of deposits, they had walked together down to Miller's Cafe and Bakery for lunch. Though it was the end of October, temperatures had risen into the 70s, and they were able to sit comfortably on the top deck overlooking the Ammonoosuc River.

After they had started eating and the small talk was declining, Anna asked Hollie, "Why doesn't your husband ever come with you?"

Hollie reminded Anna a lot of Matthew, with her slow sigh, and the way her brow furrowed when she was piecing together a response. Hollie was, in fact, a couple of years older than Matthew would have been. She had brown hair, too, though it was lighter than Matthew's had been, and her face was softer, round. That and the sadness behind it made her look younger and more innocent than she was.

"My husband, he pretends everything's fine. Family is so important to him and this last miscarriage just, it-it broke something in him. He doesn't even know I go," she confessed. A light blush tinted her cheeks.

"He doesn't?"

"He wouldn't like me talking to strangers about our personal life," Hollie explained. "But he doesn't listen when I talk to *him*, so I just told him that Wednesday nights are ladies nights for me and my friends."

"That's too bad," Anna said. She wasn't sure of what else to say, when she, too, was keeping the details of her loss to herself.

Hollie shrugged.

"I used to bring Matthew down here when he was little," Anna offered, sensing she should free Hollie's husband from the conversation. They had both finished their grilled paninis and were watching a father and his toddler daughter carefully navigate and hop across the large tan slabs of rock that made for a haphazard trail from one side of the river to the other. "He always wanted to play on the rocks just like that, but the ones in the center there, where the water gets to them more, they're covered in algae and are slippery." Anna smiled. "He'd always fall in."

Hollie smiled, too, and took a sip of her mochaccino. The father caught his daughter by the arms, quick, as she stepped onto a rock overflowing with water and her feet slid from under her. He gestured toward the shore and they started to walk back the way they'd come.

"Why have you been waiting so long to talk about him, about Matthew?" Hollie asked.

Anna shook her head. She poked with a fork at the piece of apple cider pudding cake she had ordered when they'd gotten the rest of their meal—"It's ah-may-zing," the girl at the register had sing-songed, "you have to try it."

"I haven't talked to anyone about Matthew," Anna admitted. "Not my brothers, not my friends. I thought talking to people who never knew him would be easier, but it's not."

"You can practice with me," Hollie offered, "if you think saying it in group will be too much."

"Thank you. But I think I'm ready to tell the group. I'm feeling really good about Wednesday, looking forward to it even," Anna had said with confidence. She had even thrown in a smile for good measure.

What a load of bullshit, Anna thought now. That confidence had since mutated into an anxiety that made her insides feel as though they had hardened into a heavy stone, maybe granite. She watched two other members of the group—a couple of older women, Gladys and Helen—get out of a car and waddle up to the center's front entrance. One of them, she wasn't sure which with the sun having set, waved to her.

Anna punched on the overhead light and pulled down the driver's side visor to check her makeup in its small mirror. The woman reflected back at her was unfamiliar. Her blonde hair, once silky and glistened with pinks and reds in the sunlight, now looked flat and dirty under the weight of age. The lids of her eyes sagged more than she remembered, the extra skin hiding their light mossy green and making her appear as though she were always sad. Well I am, she thought. Those eyes were the only visible thing her son had inherited from her. He had also been gifted with her craving for the creative and her questioning mind, but people never saw that. He's so like his father, they would say, and she would smile and nod.

Matthew's father had had clear, tan skin, a heavy-set jaw, and a celestial nose. When she had met him, his dark brown hair had been shaggy and dipped across his small forehead to brush his eyes, also a deep brown. She'd thought he was younger than his twenty-six years, someone to have fun with, not to get serious with. But six months later, she had gotten pregnant and they had moved in together. They had lived as a family for four months after Matthew was born. Then one

night , four months after that, Matthew's father had gone out for cigarettes and never came home. His friends admitted that he'd skipped off to Montreal. Even so, they'd still stop her to say hello, and when they did they'd say, Matthew's so like his father, as though it were a compliment, and she would smile and nod. By the time he went off to college, Matthew could have been his father-the same nose, ears, and chin, that way his skin turned a honey color the moment the sun touched him, while hers turned a garish red. But Matthew had been her on the inside, and she had thanked God for that.

Anna shut off the engine and took a deep breath before stepping out of her car. She looked up at dark silhouette of the community center. The center was actually the Eastman Mansion , a Queen Anne-style Victorian that had been built in the late-1 800s. Though in the daylight the center reminded her of an antique dollhouse, it looked different at night. The moonlight spilled across the roof's many angles, creating harsh, dark shadows. The windows were dark, too. Someone had pulled all of the drapes. Anna didn 't remember the house seeming so intimidating the week before, and she scurried across the lawn and in through the front door.

Everyone had taken to sitting in the same seats week after week, as if they were in elementary school and the seats had been assigned on the first day of class. Habit's funny that way, Anna mused. She sat across from the large fireplace, her empty stomach churning. She tucked her purse under her chair, smoothed her long, plum-colored skirt, and crossed her ankles. When they had all said their hellos , Dinah, the counselor and group leader, reminded them all that this was a safe, respectful environment, and asked who would like to begin. She smiled at them all and looked from one person to the next. Anna met her gaze.

"Sure," Anna said, then sucked in a breath. She let it out slowly through her nose, counting the seconds it took for the breath to leave, pushing until her lungs were so empty they

hurt. The room was so quiet-had it always been this quiet, she wondered, or was the silence only for her? The trembling in her hands continued and she wished she could stuff them under her to hide the shaking. Hollie, who always sat to Anna's left, took one of the hands and held it in her own, and some of the pressure welling up in Anna's chest eased.

"My son, Matthew, was killed about eight months ago now," she began. "He had-he had gotten involved with a bad group of people , very controlling. It's not that he was bad, y-you have to know that."

"Anna, it's okay, no one here is judging you or Matthew," Dinah offered, a reminder of the group's core principals. "You're safe to tell us whatever you wish."

Anna nodded and continued, "Matthew was always so bright, you know? He loved books, school. He asked questions all the time, from the moment he first started stringing words together. My family's been in Littleton for a few generations, but he couldn't wait to drive through the Notch, out of New Hampshire, and see more. He had bigger plans than a lot of the kids he had gone to school with could understand. He wanted to leave and go somewhere where he could help make a difference, do something to make a change. I think, though , that he just wasn't sure how to do that, and he had this real fear of being just another one of those guys out there who figure they can't do anything to make change happen and become-idle, I guess?

"Matthew ended up getting into Boston University , majori ng in sociology. It was hard having him gone, you know, but he called often to let me know how he was doing and what was going on down there. He was always joining groups on campus. He called me one afternoon , full of excitement , about attending a meeting about the Human Rights Movement , then there was another about Anti-Bullying. He started volunteering at shelters and with the Boys and Girls

Club for a while. He attended a lot of meetings and, for me, they all blurred together after a while.

"But he never let them interfere with his studies, always had his nose in a book. He was so young-"Anna paused and a sad smile overtook her mouth. "I think he thought that if he studied hard enough he would find some loophole in the way societies work, a way to fix it all, you know?"

A few smiles met hers, and Anna felt encouraged to continue. She felt so wonderful to be speaking all of these words about Matthew, to feel him come to life through them.

"In his sophomore year he started dating this girl Sarah. He brought her up here during Thanksgiving break-she was a sweet little thing, very polite, but she was just like him when it came to wanting to make her mark on the world. They both talked strongly about what needed to change. They were so heavy into a discussion once that I left the room for a good hour or so and when I came back they hadn't even noticed. There was a passion there, and I was glad he had found someone to share that frustration he seemed to have at the world, ever since he was a boy.

"The thing is, that passion hurt him, too. He lost a lot of his excitement and, more often than not, seemed to be angry; he thought no one cared enough anymore, that there was no way to make a stand if no one was willing to stand with you . . ."

Anna stopped and cleared her throat. She was dragging out the story too much, avoiding the hard part. But she wanted them to understand Matthew, to understand how this had happened to him. That was important.

"Anyway. Sarah had grown up somewhat religious, and while I hadn't raised him that way-I liked the idea of him figuring out his own beliefs when the time came-she convinced Matthew to go with her to a meeting for some new group that had been started

off-campus. He

told me that she thought maybe it would help give him a better perspective of people if he could see how they can come together. I-I told him that maybe it was a good idea."

When Anna stopped talking and tears started to roll down her cheeks and off her chin , Hollie handed her a box of tissues. Dinah suggested that perhaps they should take a very short break, and Anna got up and walked off to one of the bathrooms to splash cool water on her face. Nausea bubbled up from her stomach and burned through her chest. That last part, about how she had encouraged Matthew to first go to the group, had been something she had kept from her family. She had given them the bare minimum, actually, allowing them to construct for themselves a lot of what had happened. They hadn't pressed too hard anyway; they lacked her desire to understand, and had been far quicker to let what questions they had go unanswered. Even so, Anna thought, every time the death had been brought up, she had been the first to wave the topic off, to say it was too hard to talk about. She now wondered if maybe her friends and family had only pretended to let it go, for her sake.

Anna returned to the room, returned to her chair that faced the fireplace. She took this same spot week after week because, even though it was never lit when their group was here, something about the grandeur of the fireplace's handsome wooden frame and inlaid teal-colored tiles comforted her. She tried to find comfort in it now, in the warmth it gave to the room, but everything in her felt cold.

"Anna, would you like to continue?" Dinah asked. Dinah had explained at the first meeting of their group that she preferred flexible, unguided sessions-she would allow the members to take the discussions where they pleased, and never push any of them to talk if they were not willing. "You know best what you need," she had told them then, and remembering that now encouraged Anna to pick up her story.

"When T spoke with him after that first meeting, Matthew said he was glad he'd gone. It wasn't really a religious thing, even though the man running it was a reverend and they used his church as a meeting place, and it wasn't new, as Sarah had thought; the reverend had relocated from Connecticut, and some people had followed him to Massachusetts. His idea was to create a place that was accepting of everyone, no matter their race, religion, sexual preference. Matthew was really excited about it; I think for the first time he felt that there were other people like him, just wanting a place to go where there were no labels to set anyone apart from anyone else.

"T, um, I went to a couple of meetings when I visited Matthew. Everyone was welcome, he told me, but I didn't have to go if I didn't want to. I did, though, with him and Sarah. Everyone was just *so-nice*. I thought it was going to be all young people-college kids-but people of all ages were there, some couples with babies, people my age, a lot of older folks. There were so many people, over a hundred at least. There was this atmosphere among them, I don't know-an energy that's hard to explain, and I understood the appeal. It was like they were all linked somehow, as friends, family, whatever you want to call it. A lot of them admitted that they had been bad off-drugs and everything-before they had found the group and that having that support had allowed them to start a new life and stay sober.

"When he graduated," Anna said, adjusting herself in her chair, "I thought Matthew was going to move home for a while; that's what we had talked about. But after the ceremony he told me that Reverend Anderson had bought a few hundred acres in Western Mass. and wanted to begin a farming commune for the group. Their numbers had increased dramatically by that point, too many to continue scouting out and renting other places. Matthew and Sarah decided they were going-the community already had people out there throwing up buildings, just shacks

really, for people to live in while they started planting crops and worked on the rest of the buildings.

"I couldn't stop him-I had no idea, of course," Anna told them all, and brushed her cheeks with another tissue. "He'd call now and again, not as often, of course, to tell me how things were going. He loved it out there, told me that the Reverend had said to them all that this could be their heaven on Earth. Sounds silly, doesn't it? For a reverend to say that?"

She chuckled, though it wasn't joyous.

"I visited once, when they were still setting up, and I guess it was kind of like their own little world. The place was beautiful-the housing wasn't much, but Anderson had promised that they would build something nicer once everything else was ready. You should have seen the equipment they had; I don't know where it all came from. Well, money from members, I guess. A lot of them by then were handing over their wages in exchange for housing within the community. Matthew told me once that several of the older people-retirees, you know-they had signed over their pensions, sold their houses. Imagine . . ."

Anna shook her head. She realized she had deviated from her point there and tried to retrace her thoughts. There was so much to explain, so much she wanted them to understand about the appeal of such a place and the twisted way in which people were used. "They had plowed the fields already, when I saw it, and had vegetables growing. There were animals, too, for milk and for meat. I worked alongside some of the other folks. Matthew even joked that I should sell the house and come down, but he knew my roots were too deep to ever do that.

"He must have been there a good couple of years before things started to really off to me. His calls became sparse, you know? And he'd always have a reason-reception was so bad out

there that his cell phone didn't work, or he was so busy he just didn't have the time. He didn't come home for his last Christmas, before-well, before everything happened.

"Something didn't feel right to me about that. We'd always been so close, with his father not being in the picture, and he'd always been great about calling or e-mailing. Christmas had been a special time for us, as it is for so many people, of course. But when I'd ask him if everything was okay he'd tell me it was. He always sounded so tired, though! Worn out--old, even. My brothers, they never understood when I tried to talk to them about it--they thought I was being an overbearing mother, unable to cope with my son growing up. They even laughed about it. For a while they had me convinced, but deep inside I knew that something with these people, it just wasn't right.

"So I drove down there around this time last year, just a few months before he died. The whole place was fenced in--it hadn't been like that before--and I had to wait at a gate while someone called Reverend Anderson to ask permission for me to come in. I was allowed only to sit at a picnic table just inside the gate and the guards watched me like a hawk. Matthew came up in a truck not long after and he looked so-different." Anna stopped and bowed her head.

Hollie wrapped an arm around Anna's shoulders. "Anna, you can stop if you want."

But Anna shook her head. She knew that if she didn't say it now, then she never would. The knots in her stomach, heavy though they were, were already loosening. She needed to tell this story more than they needed to hear it.

"He looked different," she continued. "His face was sunken in, his skin was dark from working out in the sun. His eyes, they were--darker somehow. More serious. He had a scar across one of his cheeks, and another couple going up his arms. When I asked him what had happened, he told me that he'd had problems with one of the machines, that it was fine. He

wouldn't meet my eyes, though, and the way the men that had been watching me were now watching him, I just –it was like they were daring him to say something, daring him to slip up somehow.

"He told me that he and Sarah had gotten engaged, he was sorry he hadn't called to tell me. That scared me; I guess I knew that if he loved her that much, maybe she was the reason he was staying. I pulled him into a hug and I remember just begging that he come home with me, whispering in his ear that he could just hop in the car and we'd drive. He pushed me back, not hard, just to arms length, and I saw a fear in him that I'd never seen before. He looked at the man who had made me wait outside the gate and then told me I needed to leave. He walked me back to my car, kissed my cheek and said that he'd call soon.

"God knows how many hours I drove to get there, and not ten minutes after he met me at that gate he was telling me he'd call. That hit me like a blow to the chest, just knocked something right out of me. For a few weeks I carried my cell phone everywhere. I took it into the bathroom and held it when I went to sleep at night, just in case he called. Not a word on Thanksgiving, not on Christmas either. My brothers realized then that maybe I was right, but they still insisted that maybe it was as simple as a man needing to strike out on his own.

"I'd given up on hearing from him when he called me a few months later, the night before he was killed. He was out of breath when I answered, and talking so fast I had to make him repeat himself. He said something was happening-those were his words, 'something's happening'- and that he was coming home. He sounded frantic. I didn't even get the chance to ask him when he was coming before he said he had to go and hung up the phone.

"Police found him and the others the following evening, when neighbors of the farm called to report several gunshots being fired. All of them were dead. Matthew. Sarah. Even

Anderson. Fifty-six people. The man who had found Matthew told me his body was crumpled up in such a way that it almost looked like he had been praying. His legs had folded under him and his arms were up across his chest and just stayed that way where he fell against the dirt."

Anna held a crumpled tissue to her nose and mouth to stifle the sobs that were shaking her body. Everyone in the room was staring. Their looks seemed a mixture of pain and horror at this story she had made them wait so long to hear, a story unlike any they had probably imagined. Anna understood; events like this, they make the news, and yet somehow they seem so far away, so unreal. Until it happens close to home.

"I read Matthew's autopsy report," Anna said through short gasps. "I spoke to the medical examiner, too, because I wanted to hear from him what he had found. He said he had found bruising on Matthew's wrists and chest that suggested he had been held down. One of his elbows and both his shoulders had been dislocated in the struggle. The examiner found a needle mark on Matthew's right shoulder, too, where he'd been injected with an overdose of Phenobarbital. He wasn't the only one either. Over a third of them showed signs of having struggled. The rest-the rest i ngested it, the drug, and washed it down with vodka."

Caleb, who rarely ever spoke, drew in a sharp breath. "Wait," he said, "You're talking about the Awakeners suicides back in February."

Anna nodded.

"Fifty-six people were found on a farm in Granby," Caleb said, looking around at everyone but Anna, explaining in case they didn't already know. "News said it was a mass cult suicide, that a note had been found by the leader's body explai ning he and his people, though they didn't believe in suicide, they could no longer live among corruption. But that wasn't it at all. News reports had been building up in that area for a few months, some woman-a former

member or something-had accused the Reverend of killing her husband when they had decided to leave. Real crazy shit."

Dinah told Caleb that that was insensitive, that Anna was sharing a very sensitive experience, and he needed to show respect. But Anna didn't hear her. At the word "crazy," Anna felt something snap in her chest, as though her heart had beat too strongly and a line of her rib cage had literally popped. Her face felt warm, tingly, and blood pounded in her ears. "Crazy" was exactly what she had feared when she had come into this group. "Crazy" was what she had feared from her family if they knew the full story. She stood from her seat, glaring at Caleb.

"He wasn't crazy!" she shouted. Her cheeks were flush with anger. "He wasn't!" "Anna, calm down-" Dinah stood, too, but Anna ignored her.

"Can you even begin to comprehend what people like that will do to you, what they do to your mind?" Anna asked Caleb. He stared blankly at her, his jaw slackened, and shook his head.

"They look for something. They look for something that's missing in you and act as though they're the only ones that can fill it. They tell you everything that you need to hear."

"Look, I'm not saying your son was crazy," Caleb said, his voice slow, and his hands up. "I'm saying the situation was crazy. And you said it yourself just then, he must've felt something was missing to go along with that, you know? Must have needed whatever they were offering to go along with it."

"Caleb, please, we're not analyzing-" Dinah tried to calm the situation. But Anna seethed, not ashamed to finally have someone to lash out at. This was what she needed: to have someone in front of her who she could, even in some small way, blame for her anger.

"You son of a bitch ," Anna said to Caleb. The rest of the room had darkened, and as far as she was concerned, he was the only one there to hear her. The rush felt good, and the way Caleb's face had paled felt good , too. "He was a fucking *victim!*"

With that she fell back into her chair, the anger flooding out of her, spilling with her tears against the suede of her skirt. Everyone was arguing around her, some of them chastising Caleb, some of them trying to calm the others, and Dinah somewhere in the middle trying to settle them all. Anna, though, was quiet, a sort of peace having settled through her amid the chaos. She wondered if maybe she should say something to settle everyone, but she had said everything she needed to.

Faith

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"We died because you would not let us live. "

Annie Moore
November 18,
1978

•

When you wake up, Jim's voice is crackling through the speaker in the corner of your dorm. You are used to this. You work to, eat to, fall asleep to, and wake to this same crackling voice every day. You hear it even when you are sleeping. It has become background noise, though you are not supposed to treat it like background noise. This morning you listen.

The rest of the beds in your cottage are empty. You feel guilty for having overslept, but you think that somehow today it doesn't matter. You dress in khaki capris and a loose, peach-colored t-shirt, and pull your hair back into a messy ponytail. After making your bed, you step outside. The sun is shining, but the air is thick and oppressive. You shade your eyes and look up. You know something is moving in.

You take your time walking to the pavilion. You pass rows of coffee plants and trees heavy with bananas and mangoes. The basketball court is empty. When you first arrived here, you found the isolation relieving. Everything was clean. The Guyanese jungle was beautiful and full of mysterious new life. You forgot quickly the sounds and smells of the city. You savored the taste of the pineapples, plantains, and avocados that you had helped grow, of eggs collected from the coop that morning, of milk fresh from the cow. You came because you wanted Utopia.

We'll make heaven down here.

But today you look at the lush green forest that encircles the compound, the sharpness with which it cuts into the blue sky, and you wonder what it would be like to turn off your path and walk through that jungle. You wonder if there is still life waiting for you on the other side. Could you leave? Could you return to a world full of people who don't understand who you are and what you stand for? To a world of prejudice and war? No. As if by command, another part of your mind wakens to shut this thought down. There is no other side. *That world is not our home.* This is your home.

The pavilion is crowded. So are the kitchen and the dining tent. Children play on the playground. But everywhere the mood is subdued. You recognize that the heaviness in the air is weighing on more shoulders than your own. Before long you spot Congressman Ryan and his aide. They are already making their rounds through the compound, and the reporters have returned from Port Kaituma. You drink your coffee and try to avoid their questions. They are here for only a few more hours.

•

Last night the pavilion was lively. Before the congressman arrived, rehearsals had been held for his reception. You dressed up. You knew to smile, and what to say. When the sun set and Ryan, his team, and the journalists were allowed in, they were taken to the pavilion where they were welcome to sit with Jim and everyone around a large table. You sat, too, but at a distance.

A black woman-what was her name?-took to the main stage and sang Guyana's national anthem, and followed it with "God Bless America." The Soul Steppers, a singing group, replaced her. Congregational members sang and clapped. You danced and let yourself forget about those who were retained and beaten publicly because they wanted to leave. You sang along

and let yourself forget that children are encouraged to turn in their family members who in private reveal anything but praise for Jim. You danced harder. Everyone danced. *We are happy.*

At the end of the evening, Jim 's wife brought Ryan to the stage where he gave a short speech. He had been well received, and he would return to the United States to give a positive report to your concerned families. Cheers shook the pavilion . *This is who we are.*

But who you were last night is forgotten. By noon the blue sky has moved on and clouds the color of smoke and charcoal crack open above you and free torrential rains. They do not last long, but the darkness lingers, and it is obvious something has broken. You hear that several people have asked to leave with the congressman. The gay cop and a young black woman, his friend. An elderly woman. They say they are unhappy here, that they are being kept here against their will. Journalists circle Jim like vultures , their questions fast, accusatory. *We have our story.* Everything is unraveling.

Arguments break out among families, friends. Jim mumbles to reporters about lies and conspiracies, denies their questions about drugs, abuse, and barbarianism. From one of the wooden walkways you watch him. He is dressed in tan trousers, a short-sleeved red shirt, and black sneakers. Dark sunglasses take up much of his face and hide his eyes, but you think he looks tired. His body is crumbling from drugs and alcohol. His words are no longer strong and clear, but come out soft and with a lisp. He is not the man you followed across the country after hearing him speak at your small church about equality and freedom.

But the memory of that man still sparks something in you, the blind faith with which you left your home and your family to chase a dream of a better world. You look around at the men , women, and children, black and white, young and old, and remember that you have all become each other's kin. *And peace- have we had it?* You think that maybe you have.

•

By mid-afternoon, when Ryan 's party is set to leave, fifteen members have chosen to leave with them. Ryan has decided to stay, to smooth over any controversies about the defections. You are friends with several of the people who load themselves i nto a truck, but you do not say goodbye for fear you will be punished for doing so. You are surprised to see one of Jim 's right-hand men join them at the last minute. You are vaguely aware of a man beside you crying. You don't take your eyes off of the truck.

Suddenly, the man beside you lunges forward and you step back. He grabs Ryan from behind and holds a knife to him. You are pushed farther back as others around you grab the man with the knife , pull him away from the congressman. People around you scream, and, startled, you join them. You look at Jim. Is he displeased that the man tried to kill Ryan, or that he failed? His face is red and sunken looking. He sucks his cheeks i n and pushes them out.

Ryan is talking and you wiggle through a mass of people to hear him. He is assuring Jim that he will not blame the people for this one man 's actions and will still issue a positive report to the United States government as long as the man is arrested and the proper authorities called. Given the circumstances, though, he is leaving with the rest of his party and the defectors for the Port Kaituma airstrip.

They leave, and people-saddened , angry, confused-return to their apartments and dorms. You do not talk to anyone, because talking is dangerous. Instead, you return to your cottage and lie down, very aware that the day is not over. Shortly after, the crackling voice comes through the speaker and asks everyone back to the pavilion for a meeting.

Jim is behind the microphone. He has just told everyone that, very soon, someone on the plane out of Port Kaituma will shoot the pilot, and the plane will crash into the jungle. The

congressman , his aide, the journalists, and the fifteen members who left with them will all be dead. Jim warns that when it happens, the United States government will parachute in on you, on him, on everyone around you. You feel grief for your friends who are already dead and a fear for yourself and the others that are still here. This fear seems to cut you in half, and for a moment it hurts so bad that you think you are already dying. *There 's no way we can survive .*

Jim says he didn't order it. Do you believe him? He didn't order it, but it is going to happen. *We can't go back.* He says that we will all take a drink and step over peacefully. He calls it a potion like they took in Ancient Greece. *And we had better not have any of our children left when it's over.*

When a woman in front raises her hand and the speech is interrupted, something stirs in your chest. Panic? Hope? She asks about Russia. *Is it too late for Russia? Couldn 't we all airlift to Russia, like you said we would?*

You don't know her well, but you recognize her. She is the only one allowed to keep and wear her jewelry here. You know that she has argued with Jim and that he listens to her. You wonder if Jim is scared of her. You have heard the whispers that he once held a gun to her head and shouted at her during a meeting, but she didn't back down. You decide that the twinge in your chest is hope, and you nod along with her question . *Is it too latefor Russia?*

It is too late for Russia.

Around the pavilion you see that there are tables lined with steel tubs, five-gallon buckets, syringes, plastic cups. People are opening and pouring Flavor-Aid into the buckets and following it with whatever is in the large white bottles. Suicide. You don 't know if you heard the word or if it came to you, but there it is. *They brought this upon us.*

You have practiced for this. *We have practiced for this.* But now that the stakes are real you are not so sure. Music has started playing. People around you are crying. Jim is still talking, still preaching to you. He tells you the adults need to be brave, to help the children. He says to be patient, to feel no sorrow. But there are mothers lining up with their children, giving them cups, using needleless syringes for the ones too young to take a sip. This is happening too fast and too slow. Bodies are falling around you, and Jim is still talking.

A white plastic cup is held out to you. The woman who poured it is saying something to you, but you don't hear her. You are watching a young black girl writhe on the ground. *Be kind to the children.* Frothy bubbles build on her lips, tumble over. Her chunks dig into the mud. *If we give them our children, then our children will suffer forever.* When she stops moving

breathing?-her eyes are open and you are grateful that she is not looking at you, because how could you answer the question you know she is asking?

You realize that you are breathing fast. You push away the hand holding the cup out to you and plum-colored poison sloshes onto your shoes. Another cup is held out, more insistently this time, but you don't see the hand holding it because you are now looking at another hand.

This one is pointing a gun at you. Your heart yells *run, run, run* with every heavy, hammering beat. Someone tells you to take the drink-this is what you swore to do. *This is what we swore to do.*

You refuse again and the gun is gone and you are on your back on the ground. Two men and two women are holding you down. You do not give in. Something inside you that has been shut off for a long time is turned on again, and you want so desperately to reclaim your life. You want to think for yourself, but too late. You fight hard, pulling away from all of the hands, the

tightness of their grips. You pull your legs and arms away from these people, these monsters you

thought were your family, and you kick out again. Your shirt is riding up and you can feel dirt and rocks scrape against your back. You try to push yourself up, up, away, but they hold you tighter. They pull you in four different directions, like a starfish stretched on the beach. You hear something crack, and the burning pain that follows is so delayed that you almost don't make the connection. Your left arm is now useless. You feel a tearing in your legs. You realize now that you are crying and gasping, but even though they are literally pulling you apart, you can't stop, not yet. Another pop, and another. You lose the ability to use your legs, your hands, your arms.

All of the hands let you go and move on. You are tired. The woman who held out the cup to you now shadows your face. She dips one of the needle less syringes used for the babies into your mouth. You try to spit it out, a last resort, but she pinches your nose and holds your jaw shut until you swallow.

The cyanide punch has been sitting in large steel buckets in the sun. It is warm, and though the poison has been mixed with grape-flavored Flavor-Aid, it is also bitter. You can feel it wash down your throat and into your empty stomach. Around you, children are screaming and crying. A shot is fired, but you can't pinpoint from which direction it came. You listen and wait, because there is nothing else you can do. Thankfully, your wait is not long. Within minutes, your head feels as though there is something inside of it, growing, and trying to push its way out. You think you may vomit, but nothing comes up. You are aware that your heart seems to be running a race in your chest and you are struggling to suck air into your lungs. You try to scream, but your throat is closing.

Even if you could, who would hear you?

Melinda Leigh

I find myself outside her apartment for the second time this afternoon. She lives on the first floor of a two-family home. From the outside, the house, painted beige with cranberry trim, looks like it is falling apart. The storm door must have once been white, but is orange-rusted and grey from dirt and, no doubt, the exhaust of passing cars. The paint of the house and trim is chipping, and the walls of the porch are cracked and full of holes. The porch itself feels sturdy, though. I give a little bounce and am satisfied that nothing makes a sound or seems to move.

My left middle finger is stretched, poised to push the doorbell, but I drop my hand and instead look at the thin strip of masking tape with her name that she has placed above the bell. The tape, which wasn't placed on straight, has been there long enough that the cream color has darkened to a dirty yellow, and the corners are peeling back from the wood. I want to grab one of those corners and pull, but I don't.

Her name is written in all capital letters, in Sharpie: *MELINDA LEIGH*.

"Melinda Leigh." I speak the name out loud and find that her first name rolls into her last with languid ease. I say the names slowly, "Melinda . . . Leigh," but the effect is still there.

"Melinda Leigh, Melinda Leigh, Melindaleigh." Her name stops being her name and becomes a whimsical word, and I like the way that word sways through my mouth and makes my tongue dance.

I wonder what Bob's last name is and if she'll take it when they marry.

Bob. I'm here because I want to tell her that I think she's making a mistake marrying Bob. She has too much personality to marry a Bob and live the life that marriage to a Bob

implies. I see her with a man named Antonio, with thick black hair and a Florentine accent , or maybe a photographer named Nikolai whose career was in fashion but whose excitement lay in exotic travel. I want to tell her that she deserves a man who 'll complement her intelligence, her beauty, and her brightness. Bob is not that man, but I still find myself hesitating before the doorbell.

I'm just wasting my time again. As compensation, I give in and tug the tape from the doorframe and stuff Melinda Leigh 's name into my purse. I wonder ifl should try one more time to ring the doorbell, but my feet are already turning away from the door and carrying me down the brick steps. Now is not the time.

•

The first time we met had been at Barney's Cafe. I had served her a large caramel macchiato with skim milk, whipped cream and extra caramel. I had been swirling the extra caramel onto the whipped cream and wondering what nutritional value the customer thought would be saved by asking for skim milk, when she had leaned across the pick-up counter and told me not to be shy with the caramel. "I hate the taste of anything coffee-related," she had said with a sigh, "but today I need the boost."

When she grinned at me, a wave of her hair spilled from behind her ear. In the sunlight streaming through the cafe' s floor-to-ceiling windows, her hair looked to be the same deep red as wet fall leaves. She tucked the strand back in, and I became fascinated by her complexion. She had several freckle-like birthmarks on her face. But, unlike freckles, her marks were not chaotic and splattered across her skin like paint to a Pollack canvas. No, her birthmarks were few-I counted six-and deliberate. I imagined her as a doll sitting with her eyes closed, no breath of

life yet in her, while her designer took a round brush, dipped it into mocha-colored paint, and one-by-one placed the dots across her pink forehead, chin, and cheekbones.

She looked at me expectantly, and I realized I was still holding her drink . I placed a lid over the paper cup, pleased that the fluffy white of the whipped cream was almost entirely hidden beneath the sticky brown of the caramel. As I handed the drink over, I glanced at the name the cashier had written in black block letters when she had taken the order. "Here you go, Melinda. Extra , *extra* caramel."

Melinda took her drink, blew into the steam that spiraled from the small opening, and took a sip. Then she smiled, eyed up my name tag, and said "*Grazie*, Darcy!"

She walked away then , and I watched her until she was out the door. She was dressed in dark skinny jeans and a belted heather grey wrap sweater tied in a bow at her waist. Her ankle boots, a dark, brown leather , clicked softly across the ti les. I was taken aback by the sheer amount of buoyancy she radiated with each of her light steps. If asked I wouldn 't have considered her a skinny girl, but she looked healthy , and the way her waist pulled in and her chest and hips rounded out gave her a pleasant shape. A pumpkin-colored canvas messenger bag bounced off those hips and I imagined her as a student at the town 's state university , studying an unusual form of painting, or poetry , or musical theory . Maybe theatre .

•

Carver isn 't a big place , and most people that can be found here are students, employees , or visitors of the university. In fact, I'd be comfortable placing a bet that nine out of ten people downtown, and ten out of ten people who come into Barney's, belong in some way or have some kind of business to do with the university. I moved here a couple of years ago when I started my Masters in Film Studies. My apartment is just off the main campus drive, so I can walk to work, and there are always people around. Even when you have a hard time making friends, it's hard to get lonely.

Honestly , though , without the institution, everything else here would have shriveled up and died out a long time ago. Because of this, I'm not surprised when on my way into Barney's one morning-it must have been a week or so after we met-I see Melinda disembark from a campus shuttle and start walking in my direction. I wave as we pass, but she must not see me because she doesn't wave back.

I try not to let the incident bother me too much , but when I get into work an awkward feeling has built a nest in my stomach. I've never been very good at interacting with new people; I feel that I bother them. I start to worry that maybe Melinda did see me and hadn't waved back because with that small gesture I had bothered her. As I dwell on the moment, the eggs from that nest in my stomach start to hatch , and with each one I feel new levels of confusion , then sadness, then anger.

"Hey, you okay?" asks one of my coworkers. She's new; I forget her name and don't care enough to look at her and read the silver metal plate attached at her breast.

I feel a warmth in my neck and my cheeks. I shrug.

"Yeah, fine. I just need a break. I think someone asked for this," I say and hand her the mug of coffee I've been holding. I take off my apron and head for the ladies' room. Behind me I hear her say to someone, "I'm really sorry about that ; I'll get you another cup."

Customers often complain that we don't have a multi-stall restroom, but J like that there's only one toilet for each gender. I can have a room to myself, and as long as I slide the latch no one's going to barge in and ask why I have my forehead planted against the cool of the mirror. I close my eyes and keep my head there until someone knocks.

"In a minute," I call. I flush the toilet and wash my hands, just for good measure, to make it seem like I really needed to be in here. My boss wonders, sometimes, where I go off to. That's how he puts it: "Where do you go off to, Darcy?"

When I walk out of the bathroom and back towards the counter, Melinda is standing at the pick-up counter waiting for my nameless coworker to bring her her order. She sees me walk up and smiles in recognition. All of the chirping birds in my stomach quiet themselves, and I think that maybe I was wrong, maybe she really was just too distracted to see me. I decide not to mention it; I don't want her to be mad.

"Hey, extra caramel! Melinda, right?" I do what I can to keep my voice light and upbeat. At least with her I don't have to keep reminding myself to smile.

She laughs, "Yes, but today I'm just a green tea."

"No sugar-boost today?"

"No, no. I'd been up all night studying for my first exam and was afraid I'd fall asleep during the undergrad course I teach."

"Oh, what are you studying?"

"Marine biology. I used to want to work as a marine mammalogist, you know, with whales and dolphins and such." I nodded, and she continued, "But with more and more oceans and wetlands being compromised, I've decided I'd really like to become a part of the conservation efforts."

She smiles at me and rolls her eyes. "Sorry, I'm babbling. I do that."

"No, that's great," I tell her, impressed that she's willing to dedicate her life to a selfless cause. Does she have any flaws at all? The only one I can conjure up is her ordering a sugar- and

calorie-loaded drink with skim milk, but she's fixed that with her green tea. And even so, I find her anti-coffee, pro-sugar reasoning endearing.

Nameless interrupts us to hand Melinda her cup.

"*Merci beaucoup!*" she exclaims, then turns to leave. I stop her.

"Why do you do that?" I ask.

"Do what?"

"Say 'Thank you' in a different language each time."

"Oh!" She giggles, and I can't help but think that her answer doesn't really matter. "I just do it as a reminder to myself. There are all these things I want to learn, but don't have time right now, you know? Languages top my list."

"Oh," I say, and I let her leave. I can't think of anything to say that's as perfect an answer.

•

Melinda comes in to Barney's every Tuesday and Thursday, always around three p.m., and gets a hot drink to go. I make sure that I'm the one in charge of her order, just in case she wants extra of something. (Not all of the employees here really give extra milk or whipped cream or caramel, they just pretend to.) I like talking to Melinda and I'm surprised at how comfortable we both are with each other. At first we stick to small talk, and she tells me a lot about the classes she's taking and the one she's teaching. Eventually she mentions her boyfriend, Bob, who works at a bar and sounds dull, but I don't say so. I describe my thesis-a discussion of the role of family in contemporary cinema-but don't mention the difficulties I've been having with it. I'm delighted when she says, "That sounds really interesting."

On a Thursday in late-October she walks in, places her order, and chats while I make her drink. I tell her to hold on, I have a surprise.

From behind the counter, I pull out a thin, green book with a watercolor illustration of the Colosseum on the cover. I hand over *Italian in 10 Minutes a Day*. A look I'm not familiar with flickers over Melinda's face and disappears so fast that I'm not sure it was really ever there. She's staring at the book as though she can't quite comprehend what a book is. I explain, "See? You can start to learn---everyone can spare ten minutes a day, right?"

I watch her take in what I've said, and then she's conscious again and beaming at me. "Thank you, Darcy. That was really sweet of you to think of me."

Melinda takes her book and her drink and leaves.

I don't stop grinning all day, or all the next day, or all weekend. In truth, I don't think I stop grinning until Melinda comes in the following Tuesday and stands quietly by my counter. I don't think she placed an order, so she must be waiting for me. She looks tired; her hair is tied up into a messy bun, her cheeks are lacking their rosy color, and her eyeliner is smudged. She doesn't say hello.

"You're not yourself today," I say. She doesn't reply, so I go for a different approach. "The weather is really bad, huh? Rain all week."

Melinda looks at me. "Yes, lots of rain."

"We might get snow, too."

"Oh?" she asks, and looks toward the other barista.

"Want anything?" I ask, trying to draw her back.

"Bob and I had a fight," she states.

I don't let the excitement show on my face. Instead, I plaster on what I hope is a look of sympathy and encourage her to go on. She gushes, "He wanted to discuss the wedding. I said I don't have time for wedding plans right now, that I need to focus on my degree. And he just

blew up and said that if I didn't have time to plan the wedding maybe it's because I don't want the wedding. But that's not it. You get it, don't you, Darcy?"

I know I should say something about the argument, but I want to ask her why she doesn't wear an engagement ring if she's engaged. I didn't know she was engaged.

"He's been mad that I haven't been spending time with him," she continues, "and I shouldn't have gotten mad the way I did last night, but when he accused me of not wanting the wedding I just blew up, and all of the stress I've been feeling about classes and work and everything just came out, and I didn't *mean* for it to be at him, you know?"

I can't figure out why she is making excuses for Bob's behavior. He had no right to blow up at her the way he did—she's so busy all the time trying to get herself through classes and meeting with her students to help them get through their classes. And all he's doing is running a stupid bar. He probably doesn't even understand the kind of time and effort someone like Melinda has to set aside, or the kinds of sacrifices she has to make to achieve her goals. I feel the anger rising in me, and I want to tell her that Bob is full of shit, but all I can manage is, "Yeah."

"I think we'll be okay, though," she says to herself, not to me, and I want to shake her. She's so nice that she doesn't even understand when someone doesn't deserve how nice she is, and how beautiful she is, and how smart. "He knows I'm just under a lot of pressure right now."

"Yeah, well, Bob is obviously a fucking idiot," I bark.

She looks startled and goes quiet again. Finally, she says, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to vent all of that."

"That's okay," I tell her. That's what friends are for.

I wait, then I ask her, "Melinda, did you order anything? I didn't get an order—"

"Oh! No , I didn't." Melinda laughs and I notice that even her laugh sounds off today. "How silly of me," she says, sounding uneasy, "standing here waiting for my phantom drink."

Melinda still doesn't make a move to get in line and order. She's just looking at me, expecting something. I pull down a large cup and make her a hot chocolate. I walk around the counter to hand the steaming cup to her, something I never do. She's taken aback but thankful. I look at the clock-I'm stuck here for another five hours , but I ask my manager if I can take a break and tell Melinda that I'll walk her home.

•

Melinda stops coming into Barney's. After a couple of weeks , I start to worry that maybe something is wrong, that perhaps something happened with Bob and she needs my help. I take to looking for her on the streets, on the campus shuttles. Once I try looking for her in the biology building , but I'm not sure at what time she teaches and I miss her. A student directs me to her office, and I leave a note on her door telling her I was there and that I'm worried she hasn't come into the cafe. I look her up in the phone directory, but just about everyone these days has a cell phone and no landline . When another week passes , I go back to her office. My first note is gone, so I leave another. *I'm really worried now, Melinda. You need to come see me soon.*

Something is wrong, and in the end I decide to go to her apartment and find out what. I visit the house twice without ringing the bell. I'm concerned that when I get there I'll meet Bob instead of Melinda, and if that happens I'm not sure what to do. The third time I visit, later the same day, I gather up the courage to push the doorbell , and I stand there in the biting November cold, waiting for someone to answer. I push the button again , and keep waiting. The birds in my stomach are awake and chirping again. I know that something is wrong now and I walk back down the front steps.

Melinda is smart. She keeps a hide-a-key in case of emergencies, but not under the front mat, or in a silly fake rock like a lot of people. Hers is hidden in a groove of the hose reel mounted on the side of the house. That day she had her fight with Bob, she forgot her key and I had to wait for her to get the hidden one out.

I walk around to the side of the house, and after maneuvering the hose a bit, I pull out two keys. I'm confused because I remember her using only one, but suppose that maybe one is for the back door. I try them both in the front door, and when the door opens, I replace the keys.

The front door opens up into a dark living room. This is my first time in her apartment. I flick a switch beside the door. The room is spacious, filled with books, ornaments, and candles. To my left is a door to the kitchen, and in front of me another door to what looks like a dining room. I make my way into the kitchen first, turning on lights as I go, and find that the kitchen connects to a bathroom and into the dining room, too, which leads back to the living room, to the bedroom and to a makeshift office. Melinda's messenger bag hangs limp from a desk chair. No one is home.

I walk back into the living room, to a faux fireplace on the wall opposite the door. I run my hand over the mantelpiece, looking at the photographs Melinda has arranged there. Two are professional, engagement-style photos of her and Bob with their arms wrapped around each other, looking happy. One is of Melinda with a little girl balanced on her hip, the girl's chubby finger pointed at the camera. I take in each photo with glee, even those with Bob, enjoying getting to know parts of Melinda's life that I never knew before.

When she comes in, I don't hear her. I'm stroking the silver metal frame of one of the photographs. The photo depicts a much younger Melinda-in her teens, maybe-sandwiched between two people who I guess are her parents. All three are smiling in front of a thatch-roofed

house on stilts above the shallow waters of a Caribbean-blue ocean. A palm tree waves from the corner.

"What the-" Melinda says, startling me. I smile and turn around to say hello, but my smile fades when I find that Bob is here, too. Melinda shrieks, and I guess that she's excited to see me after such a long time. I open my arms to her, but she doesn't come over for a hug. I'm a little upset by this, and by the fact that she looks just fine. Doesn't she understand how worried I've been?

"DARCY!" she screams.

"Sorry to just show up out of the blue," I say, "but you didn't answer my notes, and I wanted to surprise you."

I congratulate myself for doing so.

"Melinda, just- I'll go get the-" Bob is looking at me and I guess he doesn't like me as much as I don't like him, which is funny because we've never met and I can't imagine Melinda telling him anything bad about me. I mean, I bought her a book. And I never stormed out on her. Bob leaves a wide berth when walking around me toward the dining room.

When he's gone, I ask, "So, are you surprised?"

"Um, yes, Darcy. I'm very surprised. How, er, did you, um-?" She looks at the door.

"Oh! I got the spare key out of the hose reel."

"How did you know . . .?"

"You showed me once, remember? When you got locked out."

"Darcy, you've never been to my house," she says, "I never showed you anything. I don't even know if I even told Bob where the keys were hidden when he moved in."

"You did!" I laugh. Melinda's memory is great when it comes to dates and facts, but she must not be great with remembering the little things. "Remember? You had come in to Barney's after you had that really bad fight with Bob, and I gave you a hot chocolate to cheer you up. I was worried about you, so I walked you home"

"Darcy, you did not walk me home that day," Melinda says, and I notice that she keeps saying my name, and that she's talking to me like an adult talks to a child who has misbehaved. "You offered, but I said no."

The tone bothers me, and I adopt the same voice to try to make her remember. "I did, and you forgot your key and were really upset." I don't know why she can't remember. "I waited while you got the key out."

"Oh my god, did you follow me?" She's screaming again and I'm shaking my head. "Did you, Darcy?!"

"No! I-"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Bob comes running back into the room, frantic and glaring at me. He takes up a guard-like position beside Melinda, with his hand on her back.

"I called the cops," he tells her. They both stare at me.

"Why?" I ask. I keep my eyes on Melinda. I don't want to look at Bob. I'm worried that they need the police, but also proud of myself-I was right, something is wrong. Everything seems to be okay in the apartment, though, and I wonder if maybe something took place that I'm not aware of-a car break-in on the street that they happened to witness when they were coming in, or maybe they were mugged and rather than go to the station they had decided to come home. That reasoning seems flawed, though; Melinda would go to the police right away.

Bob is standing closer to Melinda and laces his fingers through hers, petting her hand with his thumb. He clears his throat and his focus changes from me, to Melinda, and then to me again. I still don't look him in the eye, and expect that Melinda will understand that I don't want him to answer, I want her to answer. She's my friend. I don't like Bob.

"Because we've had a break-in," he informs me.

I look around. On one wall there is a plasma television, and below that a stand that holds a DVD player and several gaming systems. There are a few DVDs stacked up, too. My eyes run down the titles : *Inception*, *The Princess Bride*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *The Break-Up*.

They're mostly romcoms, the same ones that I like, and I suppose they're Melinda's. But I pause on *Groundhog 's Day* and decide that must be Bob 's. On either side of the stand are cases of books, and on one case is an iHome with the iPod still in it. I shake my head.

"But nothing is missing," I tell them, and I think of the pearl necklace Melinda often wears but isn't wearing today, and of the emerald earrings she once told me had belonged to her grandmother. "Did they take your jewelry? I wonder why they would take your jewelry and not bother with all of this stuff."

Bob groans and throws up his arms. He starts to say something, but Melinda shushes him and looks at me with her head cocked. "They didn't take anything , Darcy."

She's still saying my name too much. Her voice is soft and devoid of the cheerful bounce I've grown accustomed to. This incident must be difficult for her, and my heart breaks thinking about how frightened she must be-I'm not sure how I would feel at the violation of someone breaking into my home. I want to comfort her somehow, and tell her that everything will be okay, but Bob is so close to her, touching her, and I don't think he would let me so much as hug

her. His possessiveness bothers me, but I remind myself that he's probably trying to calm her, too.

I'm trying to figure out what I want to say, what will assure Melinda that everything is going to be fine, that we'll keep her safe, when the doorbell rings. The deep bing-bong of the bell is followed by several loud knocks.

"Carver PD," a man shouts. "Please open the door."

"It's unlocked," Bob yells. He backs away from the front door toward the kitchen and draws Melinda with him to make more room for the two officers-both men-who come into the living room. They're both tall and dark-haired. One sports a mustache. They look younger than I am, too young to have their jaws set so tight and their mouths turned down in so serious a manner, too young to be toting guns and steel batons. I hope that in a town as quiet as Carver, they never have to use them.

"We've been notified of an intruder?" The one without a mustache looks to Bob. I wonder how he knew to ask Bob.

Bob points at me, but I shake my head because I'm not the intruder. One of the cops takes me by the wrist and I shake him off and step away. The cop is saying something to me, but I ignore him. "No, I'm not an intruder. I came here to check on Melinda, she's my friend. Melinda? Bob--" I finally look at him. I know Bob has misunderstood the situation-he knows that I don't like him and Melinda together and must be confused about why I'm here. "Tell them I'm not the intruder."

When I take a step toward them, I'm knocked to the floor. My arms-first my right, then my left-are wrenched behind my back. The cuffs feel cold against my wrists, then sharp as they're pushed tighter into my skin. I look to Melinda for help, pleading for her to tell the man

with his knee in my back that there 's been some misunderstanding. But she's looki ng at me with this strange look that I've never seen before. Her eyebrows are drawn in toward one another, creating an ugly crease in the middle of her forehead . Her eyes are wide and are searching mine . I try to work out what she's looking for, what question she's trying to ask me, but I can't, and suddenly I'm l ifted from the carpet and she's not looking at me anymore.

"Melinda?" I want her to look at me again. "Melinda, you need to tell them that they 're wrong. We're friends, you and I. You're my best friend. They're going to take me away."

There 's a tug on my arms and I jump. There 's a man 's voice in my ear saying, "That's enough now."

Melinda has her face buried in the green and black plaid button-down of Bob, and his arms are around her, hugging her to him. His eyes are closed and he's resting his cheek on the top of her head, while her cheek is pushed so hard against his shirt pocket that I wonder if she thinks she can fit inside there and hide from-from what? Her face looks shiny , as though someone has glazed her cheeks, those beautiful, porcelain , paint-spotted cheeks, and I realize she's crying. She's upset, and scared, I think, at what's happening to me, but she still hasn 't tol d the officer that he's wrong, that he needs to let me go, and he's already trying to lead me out of the room , out of the apartment .

"Why are you letting them do this?" I screech, and she turns her head enough to glance at me and her face has changed. She's stil l crying, but she's not sad, or scared, or confused. No , she looks at me with anger, an intense fury that is not at Bob for creating this mess, but at me for somehow being a part of it. This understanding knocks the air from me like a blow to the stomach, and J feel acid burn through my abdomen and into my chest. The heat stifles the chirping birds , kills them one by one, then destroys the nest they've built within me. I feel dizzy,

and then I start to cry, too, because I know now that Melinda's not going to tell the police officer to remove the handcuffs, that she doesn't care what will happen to me if she lets them carry me out the door.

I get tugged again and my purse falls from my shoulder, spills over onto the floor. I see something tumble and flutter out of my reach. I try to grab for it anyway before I remember I'm cuffed, and the officer grabs me harder and shoves me at the door. He's yelling now, and I'm yelling back, trying to explain that all I want is the bit of yellow that's fallen from my purse, that all I want is the piece of aged tape staring up at all of us from the carpet, reading, *Melinda Leigh*.