

IF FOUND

by

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ABSTRACT

*If Found* is a collection of fictional short stories that attempts to shed light on the small yet important moments that define life. At the core of these stories are ordinary events that could happen to anyone: a terrible storm, a night out gone wrong, a painful reunion, a long night of waiting, and the loss of a spouse. The characters themselves are also recognizable; you won't find any superheroes or wizards among them. They are your neighbor, your loved one, even yourself – average individuals that embody all stages of life, from childhood to old age. It is their unique reactions to these common situations that make them special and act as the focus of this collection. *If Found* attempts to demonstrate that there is no such thing as trivial pain, and that it is the small, everyday sorrows that are often the most significant.

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## A STRONGER CHILD THAN ME

Sometimes Kathy dreams she is made of wind. Her bones and skin and hair all melt away, and she becomes nothing but the invisible element. Not a gentle summer breeze, but a swirling gale, strong enough to uproot trees and houses. She spins uncontrollably with a power that invigorates her. She destroys everything in her path. She has no name, no solid form.

And then she awakens on the couch in an apartment. Her small body breathes heavily, covered in sweat. She holds her breath, hoping she was silent, but a minute later her brother Todd crashes into the room in a white t-shirt and blue boxers. He rubs her back and whispers comforting things, thinking that she's had a nightmare.

Kathy doesn't respond. She isn't sure if it *was* a nightmare. She isn't scared. She feels nothing except a tugging sensation, like longing, somewhere deep inside her. But she can't explain this feeling to Todd. Even awake, she remains a soundless vacuum. She hasn't spoken a word in four months.

Kathy lets her brother tuck her back under the sheets, hoping that if she smiles, the look of concern on his face will disappear and he'll go back to bed. He's spent too many nights in the chair in the corner, ready to fight back monsters that don't exist.

By day, Kathy is a normal, albeit silent, third grade girl. She goes to class and plays with her friends. She learns the names of the planets and practices writing in cursive. Her teacher is Miss Hampton, who smells like lemonade and tries to make Kathy talk all the time. But Kathy doesn't hold it against her.

Miss Hampton has decorated their temporary classroom trailer with the children's crayon drawings and handmade paper butterflies. Construction workers raise the steel

skeleton of a new elementary school nearby. Every now and then a brave soul will sneak through the fence to have a look around, but a vigilant playground monitor always catches them.

Kathy stands in front of the trailer one Tuesday, watching the clear blue sky and waiting for her brother. Todd picks her up around three in his red truck, grinning as she buckles her seatbelt.

“How’s it going, Roly Poly?” he asks, as if he expects an answer.

Kathy smiles, holding up a quiz about Mars. A bright pink A shines at the top.

“Awesome job kiddo! Let me see that. Wow, there’s water on Mars? Who would have thought? And all those red rocks, that sure is cool.” Todd says loudly.

Todd takes her to his friend Margo’s house before going back to work at the doctor’s office where he is a nurse’s assistant. Margo helps Kathy with her homework, and then lets her take pictures on her fancy camera, with its huge round lens. Margo is a student, like Kathy, except instead of learning math and science she takes pictures all day and gets graded on it. Kathy thinks maybe she’d like to be a photographer one day too. She wouldn’t have to say anything, just sit behind a camera clicking a button.

Margo is tall and beautiful. She has skin the color of milky hot chocolate and curly brown hair. Today she and Kathy dress up in silly costumes that Margo’s grandmother used to wear, and they take turns posing for the camera. They giggle and smile, but never speak. When they’re tired of posing, Margo takes Kathy into the darkroom, which isn’t dark at all but has a funny red light. She lets Kathy soak pieces of paper in a murky liquid until pictures appear, like magic.

When the photos dry, Kathy puts her picture next to Margo's and wishes she were taller, more grown up, beautiful. Kathy has straw hair and too many freckles. Her limbs are long and she can't control them. *Kathy Long Legs*, her father used to call her, after the spiders that made their home under the front steps. Margo holds herself with grace and when she smiles, her whole body smiles with her. Margo knows lots of interesting things, and if she doesn't know something she says so, instead of pretending she does, which Kathy likes. It makes her feel important, like Margo is letting her in on the secret that adults don't know everything.

Sometimes Margo stays over at Todd's apartment. They pretend she doesn't. Todd makes a huge show in the morning, saying, "Look who dropped by for breakfast!" But Kathy knows and she doesn't mind. She wishes Todd would just marry Margo already. Margo understands things without asking. Her house was destroyed too, and her grandmother along with it, so she never questions Kathy's silence. She says that she has days when she doesn't feel like talking either.

But Todd doesn't stop chattering. When they go out to dinner that night, he talks the entire time, filling her silence with his own rambling thoughts.

"So, then we realized that the patient had accidentally poured himself dog food instead of cereal! Which is why he was having such a bad reaction. After that it was easy to prescribe him treatment." Todd laughs loudly, his stomach heaving. Kathy grins, a slight giggle escaping her lips. She likes it when Todd tells patient stories.

Todd smiles broadly at her. "Did you have fun at Margo's? Did she show you her new camera? She's going to use it to photograph the town this week so she can submit pictures for some big photography contest."

Kathy nods. Sometimes she nods so much in one day her neck hurts.

“I know she really appreciates your help with the prints. You’re her perfect little assistant. Really, so helpful.” Kathy smiles, but her grin fades when Todd gets a familiar look in his eye. “So what do you want to do this weekend?”

Kathy shrugs.

“Yeah, a movie would be fun. I think that Disney one is supposed to come out next week, what’s it called?”

Kathy lifts her eyebrows.

“Right, *Winter*, yeah that looks really good. The two sisters and all the snow and stuff. We should see it.” Todd watches her, and she knows he got the name wrong on purpose just to see if she would correct him. She sighs and shakes her head, stabbing some pasta with her fork.

“You’re right, it’ll probably be crowded this weekend. We’ll go next week, definitely. I’ll order tickets online. So, what was your favorite part about school today?”

Kathy knows he’s trying, so she lets his obvious attempts to make her talk slide. Todd wasn’t around much when she was growing up, and he only came home to take care of her when Kathy’s parents died. Four months later and they are still getting used to each other. Sometimes she feels bad for not replying. She doesn’t do it on purpose. Kathy just doesn’t see the point in talking anymore. She finds it easier to think when she’s not speaking all the time.

The next morning, Todd drives her to school as usual, and Kathy stares out the window at the barren land. She can’t help but think the town hasn’t done a very good job of cleaning up in the months after the storm. It’s still half the town it used to be. Most of



the buildings are in ruin, trees still splintered in the road. And everywhere she looks she sees vast acres of empty land, like Margo's film prints before they dry.

Kathy blows on the window the way she blows on Margo's pictures. She imagines buildings rising from the ground: shops and banks and schools. A little house with a glass front door pieces back together. Trees sprout up, blossoming and shady, a rope swing hanging from the branches. A bicycle rights itself; a dollhouse's inhabitants return to the kitchen table; two hands slide into Kathy's and squeeze.

"Boy it's cloudy today." Kathy startles out of her daydream and glances at Todd. "Look at that one, it looks like a rabbit. Or maybe a snake. A snake eating a rabbit? What do you think?"

They arrive at the cluster of trailers that make up the elementary school and Kathy unbuckles her seatbelt. Todd glances at his watch as she collects her books.

"Okay kiddo, I'll pick you up after school! Have a great day. I love you."

Kathy leans over and kisses him on the cheek. That makes him smile and she hops out of the car, waving a bit as he drives away. A few raindrops hit her cheek but she doesn't brush them away. Just stands there and lets them roll down her cheeks.

As the day progresses, the rain falls harder on the thin roof and thunder cracks the sky. Heavy bursts of wind cause the trailer to quiver; once the door even flies open, allowing all manner of debris to swirl around the tiny room until the teacher manages to slam it shut.

Miss Hampton gets quieter as the storm gets louder. Halfway through the morning she flicks on the television in the corner and keeps it on silent. She continuously glances at the weather channel as she takes the students through the explorations of the Mars

Rover. Kathy can hardly concentrate on the lesson. When they color pictures of the Mars Rover, Kathy adds blue swirls in the sky and wonders if there is wind on Mars; if the empty planet was made that way over time by the constant rushing of wind.

At lunch, Miss Hampton tells the kids that school will be closing early. They will cross the street to the high school and use their auditorium until the day is over.

“It’ll be so fun,” she promises, her smile as wide as Todd’s. “There will be lots of games, and all the older kids will be there to play with you.”

Kathy obediently gathers her belongings and grasps the hand of her line partner Ava. With their jacket hoods pulled up and Miss Hampton’s giant umbrella overhead, they walk quickly across the street to the high school.

The recreation center is one of the only school buildings that went untouched by February’s disaster. It towers above the trailers and tiny buildings around it. The inside of the gym is loud and hot. Dozens of young kids run around screaming, playing games like tag and snap the whip, while the older kids huddle in groups along the walls, looking bored yet pleased to be out of class. The teachers supervise, whispering to one another in the corner when they think no one is looking.

“Come on Kathy, wanna jump rope?” Ava asks, tugging on Kathy’s hand.

Kathy lets go and shakes her head, sliding down the wall and sitting quietly to signal her refusal. Ava shrugs and joins a few other girls in double dutch. Kathy watches the rope go round and round and round, slapping the ground in a mesmerizing frequency. She listens hard for the thunder and wind outside but can’t hear anything over the drone of a hundred voices. Were those sirens? She can’t tell. She is frustrated now, and wishes

they would tell her if something was coming, instead of pretending this was just another day at recess.

The only windows in the gym are small, and high up, so all she can see is dark grey clouds. She feels hot and constricted, the collar of her jacket pulling at her throat. She thinks she might suffocate. She closes her eyes and pretends she's wind, floating on the breeze, letting it carry her up and up.

A sudden cry interrupts her daydream and her eyes snap open. Two fifth graders have gotten into a fight over a basketball. Miss Hampton and another teacher step a few paces along the wall across from her, going to break up the dispute. When they move, they leave the exit conspicuously unguarded.

Kathy stands without thinking, her eyes on the door. She slips through the crowd easily, no one giving the quiet girl a second glance. When she reaches the door, she looks around quickly, but everyone is too busy staring at the spectacle of crying children.

The outside is a different world. Everything is dark, the sky illuminated by a green tinge that fades into black. Clouds swirl in the vast, open sky, threatening to touch the earth before pulling back into themselves. Two elementary class trailers have already tipped over, and the wind picks up brightly colored drawings and tears them away into the darkness.

Kathy crosses the street with difficulty. Dirt swirls up and then down, nearly blinding her. She squints, barely able to put one foot in front of the other. She hears the wailing of sirens in the distance, the slapping of tarps attached to the construction site, the rustling of dirt and bushes.

She can't keep her eyes open anymore. The wind stings the backs of her calves and forces her forward, and then to the side. She gets turned around, unsure of where she is. Instead of fighting this force, she puts up her arms and closes her eyes, letting the wind take her. She moves forward and back in a strange dance, trying to let go of her form and become powerful wind again.

Suddenly she trips, falling to her knees with a sharp intake of breath at the startling pain. She glances down at her scrapes with disgust. When she lifts her head, something is different. Everything has gone quiet. Dust freezes, suspended in mid air. The sound of the slapping tarps and the screeching sirens disappear, replaced by the distant echo of a low roar; a noise that has not yet decided what it wants to be but is quickly building.

The roar is hollow and low, a combination of thunder and a distant train. The train seems to pick up speed, grumbling then screeching then wailing until it's right on top of her. Kathy opens her mouth and lets the noise scream through her, shaking her at the core. Kathy knows, even before she turns, what she will find behind her.

It comes from the sky. The clouds suck inward together, pulled by some invisible puppeteer. They touch down and become a single swirling mass – not the thin funnels she draws at the therapist's office, but a wall of twisting cloud. It spins around and around like cotton candy, growing bigger with each rotation. The mass expands, swallowing everything with its wide mouth, pulling from the clouds above and the debris below to extend and push out.

The tornado is soft around the edges, like a bed of fluff spinning, mesmerizing. She wants to melt into it, to blend into the swirling storm and find what lies beyond, the place where her parents might still be.

Trees clinging to the ground are ripped away from their roots and tossed into nothingness. The tornado eats a mailbox, a fence, a car. It can't be just wind. Wind shouldn't be able to do that, shouldn't be able to reach down and suck up everything she loved in the blink of a moment.

Suddenly, she's lifted off the ground. Her long legs go in two different directions, and for a split second she thinks the storm has her. A stab of fear courses through her, igniting every nerve, powering feelings that haven't been used in months.

She screams, thrashing her feet, but her cry blends into the roar of the storm, getting lost among the wind. When she recognizes the low voice in her ear and the slender arms encircling her, she stops struggling.

“Kathy! Kathy, it's me! What are you doing out here?”

Kathy goes limp as Margo spins her around to face her. Margo wears a camera around her neck, her hair whips across her face but she ignores it. Margo, always so confident, now looks afraid.

“Come on, we've got to get you out of here.”

Kathy doesn't fight as Margo swings her up in her arms and carries her to her car parked a few yards away. She curls up in the front seat as Margo starts the car and tears away from the tornado.

It's foolish to try to outrun Mother Nature, and Kathy realizes this flight is pointless. She can't bring herself to close her eyes, but she doesn't want to watch the

monster bearing down on them. She stares at the stitching on the inside of her rain jacket, the pink thread zigzagging down her arm.

The noise gets louder, overwhelming, threatening to burst her eardrums. Then it goes silent. Margo stops the car, and Kathy tears her eyes away from her sleeve, surprised that they've made it back to her house so quickly. Margo picks her up again and carries her into the house, heading downstairs. In the dark, cool basement, Margo sets Kathy gently on the couch and locks the door. She covers Kathy with a blanket, keeping a hand on her as she pulls out her phone.

"It's okay sweetie, you're safe now," she says, gently stroking Kathy's brow. Kathy burrows deep under the blankets, unable to stop shaking. From under her fort, she hears Margo's muffled voice. "I found her a little distance away from the school. I was out taking photos of the storm and saw her, just standing there. Yeah she's fine now, we're at my place. Okay, see you soon."

Margo calls the school next to let them know she has Kathy, but Kathy tunes her out. She plugs her ears but can still hear the wind, rushing and rumbling. She breathes deeply, but exhales a whistling gust. She holds her breath, squeezes her eyes shut. She doesn't want to be wind anymore. Wind destroys, it hurts. It doesn't make her feel powerful, it just makes her feel weak and scared.

She doesn't notice when Todd arrives, until he's standing right over her. "Kathy? Kathy, sweetheart."

Kathy lifts her head, peeking out of the blankets. Tears stream down her cheeks as her eyes meet Todd's. She pushes herself up a little, struggling to pull her voice from the storm inside her.

“Todd?”

Todd’s face fills with relief. He swoops her into a hug, nearly suffocating her, but she doesn’t mind. The hug makes her feel solid, like she has finally returned to her body. She closes her eyes and can feel herself reappearing, like a figure in an empty photo print.

IF FOUND, PLEASE CALL

The first time her roommate brought Mark home, Ellyn ordered takeout from a Thai restaurant. She had never had Thai food before, and didn't really have an inclination to try it, but her anthropology teacher was requiring her class to experience a different culture. Thai food was the quickest option. Ellyn had ordered extra, in case Alex wanted some, even though her roommate claimed to hate anything foreign except designer labels and Jose Cuervo.

Ellyn had forgotten about the cultural assignment until 10, when she was getting into bed. A scrawny delivery boy who smelled like curry delivered the food, and she was just finishing a box of pad thai, when the front door opened shortly after midnight.

Mark nodded at Ellyn with a bored expression, tailing Alex into the apartment. Ellyn stared at him, the noodles slipping off her chopsticks. He wasn't like the other guys Alex hung out with, the frat boys and the athletes. Mark was tall and imposing, and his muscles bulged against the sleeves of his shirt as if testing the elasticity of the fabric. Ellyn couldn't shake the feeling that he looked like the kind of guy who had killed someone. It wasn't that he had anything particularly scary about him; no visible tattoos or piercings, no leather jacket or chains. But Ellyn prided herself on being a good judge of character, and Mark's threatening aura warned away anyone with good instincts.

Alex didn't have good instincts. She led Mark into the back bedroom, and Ellyn stared after them, struggling to contain her shock because Mark was old – like, thirty. Ellyn was twenty-one, but that didn't mean she considered herself an adult.

“Mark is a teacher,” Alex confided to Ellyn the next day as they ate lunch, or breakfast, in Alex's case.



“At the university?”

Alex shook her head, a wisp of tangled hair caught on her lip. “God no. I’m not the type of girl who sleeps with a professor. Mark teaches high school.”

Ellyn struggled to reconcile the man she met last night with a high school teacher, but she could only picture him in a dimly lit bar or maybe a jail cell. “How did you meet him?”

“My little brother goes to school where he teaches and we met in the hallway when I was picking him up.”

“And now you’re sleeping with him?”

“God, Ellyn, don’t be such a prude,” Alex said through a mouthful of leftover Thai. Ellyn didn’t reply, though she hadn’t really seen anything prudish in her comment.

Ellyn got a B on her anthropology assignment. Her teacher didn’t think ordering Thai food was quite ethnic enough, but she had liked Ellyn’s writing.

“You should be a restaurant reviewer,” her comments said at the bottom of the page. It was a thought, and Ellyn carefully added it to the mental list of things people had told her she could be: Lawyer, writer, social worker, restaurant reviewer, burger flipper. Ellyn’s father threw the last one at her when she received her first “C” in college. Ellyn knew he didn’t mean it; he used insults the way her mother used silence, to let the world know of his disappointment. But Ellyn kept it on the list, just in case.

The next Friday, Alex invited Ellyn to go out with her to the bars on Miller Avenue. Her invitation wasn’t new; neither were Ellyn’s polite refusal and the insistence she had so many other things to do. And she did. Ellyn had internship applications to fill out, and volunteer work to do, and homework to get ahead on, and television shows to

catch up on. She didn't have time to stay out late and go crazy. Besides, she hated being surrounded by people she didn't know. She much preferred a quiet, safe night in.

Alex usually accepted her excuses, but this week she insisted with a desperation that caught Ellyn by surprise. Alex and Ellyn were friendly, sure, but they weren't friends. They'd met through a mutual acquaintance after both of them failed to get the housing assignment they wanted. They got along fine, but Ellyn didn't entertain any false ideas. Next year, Alex would move in with her sorority sisters and forget all about Ellyn.

"What about your friends?" Ellyn asked, when Alex followed her around the apartment Friday afternoon, begging her to go out that night.

"You're my friend," Alex insisted. "And you never go out with me." She gave a pout that Ellyn knew usually got her what she wanted.

"It's just...not my thing." Ellyn's usual excuse of being busy had failed to deter Alex, so she went to her back up explanation.

"God, Ellyn, that's because you've never tried it! It's like the Thai food, you liked that didn't you?"

Yes, Ellyn had liked the spicy curry more than she'd expected, and had since ordered from the restaurant three times. But that did not mean she was going to like a smoky, crowded bar with loud music and lots of people she didn't know.

"Our sorority has a social tonight," Alex finally confessed, throwing herself dramatically on Ellyn's carefully creased sheets. "But I'm on probation, and I'm not allowed to go."

"Why are you on probation?"

“Because I screwed the president’s ex-boyfriend. She’s totally had it out for me ever since. But the point is, like, all my friends are going, so I need someone to go with me to the bars so I can meet Mark.”

“Can’t he just pick you up?”

“God no, it’s just, he’s not that kind of guy, Ellyn. He’s not the go-steady, pick up a girl with flowers and have her home by ten type. I need to play it cool with him, which means walking into the bar with a friend and pretending not to notice him for at least fifteen minutes. Will you go with me, please? I promise it’ll be fun and I won’t leave your side the entire night.”

Ellyn sighed, every molecule in her body telling her to just stay in and watch TV. But she felt her resolve slipping.

“What do I wear?”

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At the bar Ellyn breathed more smoke than air, and drank more alcohol than water. She hadn’t wanted to drink, but just like she hadn’t wanted to wear Alex’s five-inch heels and her low cut violet top, her resolve didn’t last long.

“It brings out your eyes!” Alex had insisted. The shoes, she had also promised, would help with Ellyn’s height problem. The shoes hurt, but Ellyn put them on because Alex had never offered to lend her clothes before. And when Alex sat her down in the bathroom to do her makeup, Ellyn let her, because it felt like something sisters did. Ellyn was an only child, but she had seen movies and knew that makeovers were an essential part of the sister relationship.

Despite her intention to play it cool, Alex found Mark at the bar right away and practically jumped into his arms. Ellyn stood off to the side as they kissed deeply, trying not to watch his hands cover Alex's back pockets. She looked around the smoky, crowded room, taking in the dim lights, the loud music, and the babble of slurred conversations around her. To her right, a guy had started telling a story to his friends.

“Dude, it was fucking hilarious, this lesbian couple crashed the wedding and they...”

Alex yanked Ellyn forward before she could hear more.

“Mark! You remember Ellyn, right?”

Mark nodded vaguely. He seemed so comfortable at the bar. Ellyn pictured him as an exhibit in a zoo, curious tourists pointing and taking pictures, the tour guide reading cheerfully, “Here we see the high school teacher in his native habitat. What defines the high school teacher is a poor sense of humor, a disregard for students' social lives, and bitter alcoholism. Up next we'll visit his cousin, the sexually uninhibited college professor....”

Alex slammed a shot down on the bar in front of Ellyn. The only shot Ellyn had ever taken before that night was at her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Her friends from high school had surrounded her, chanting her name loudly until she finally took the drink. She'd hated it, and her friends quickly lost interest when they realized she wasn't going to get drunk.

Alex slushed back her first shot, then squealed and threw her arms around Ellyn's neck when Ellyn followed suit. The drink tasted like cleaning supplies, and had a stinging after burn. Ellyn wondered why people subjected themselves to drinking something that

tasted like it could kill you. But the minute the taste had faded, the idea of taking another shot didn't sound like such a terrible idea.

Alex watched her eagerly, waiting for a reaction. Ellyn passed the bartender her glass. "All right, another one."

Two hours later, after several more shots, an embarrassing attempt at dancing with a freshman, and losing Alex and Mark to the back bathroom for thirty minutes, Ellyn stood outside in the front of the bar, casually chatting with a string of people waiting for the valet to bring their cars. Ellyn had needed air, and decided to wait out the rest of Alex's drunken adventure outside, where she could hear herself think. She found herself engaging in the kind of polite conversation people have with someone they know they will probably never meet again. She discussed the weather with a freshman broadcast journalism major who drove a beat up Chevy; the benefits of wearing comfortable shoes to a bar with two law students who hopped into a blue Subaru; and her extreme lack of interest in going home with a guy named Andrew or Aaron, who drove a really nice car. At least she thought it was a nice car. Ellyn considered anything painted a shiny, cherry red to be nice.

As she watched Andrew/Aaron drive away, she wondered if she should have accepted his offer. Not his implied offer, but his offer to take her home. It was starting to get colder, and her feet were seriously killing her. What buzz she'd had was fading into a headache, and all she wanted to do now was sleep. But Ellyn wasn't about to abandon her roommate to the mercy of the high school teacher. Sometimes Ellyn hated feeling so responsible, but then again, if she didn't do it, who would?

As Ellyn contemplated her next move, a girl stumbled out of the bar wearing no shoes, and brushed past her. Ellyn watched her take a few shaky steps, stop, look around, then take two more. She repeated this pattern several times, only making it about halfway down the block. Ellyn looked on with interest, thinking of a game she used to play as a kid, watching ants struggle to make it up a hill carrying their load. In the corner of the playground, she would make imaginary bets as to whether or not the ant would abandon its quest, or prevail to the top of the mound.

Ellyn would bet against this girl. She was pretty, but the kind of pretty that a good hose would probably get rid of. The straps of her dress had fallen around her elbows and her hot pink bra was showing. Ellyn pulled her own shirt up a little higher and hoped she didn't look like that.

"Are you okay?" Ellyn asked. The girl swayed to music only she could hear, reaching out a hand to steady herself against the nearby wall.

Without warning, the girl opened her mouth and vomited on the side of the road. Ellyn jumped back, bewildered. The girl kept her head down, coughing out whatever was left. Ellyn cautiously reached out a hand and patted the girl on the back, breathing through her mouth to avoid the smell.

"Okay," Ellyn said. "That's okay, it's better to get it out, right, rather than..."

The girl stumbled forward a few steps and seemed to give up. She plopped down on the sidewalk with splayed limbs, laid her head down, and elegantly passed out.

Ellyn stared at her for a second, watching spittle run down the side of her throat. She leaned forward and tapped the girl on the shoulder. No response. Ellyn shook her slightly, the girl's head lolling side to side. "Ummmmm, wake up?"

The girl ignored her. Ellyn sighed, awkwardly fishing through the girl's pockets. But the girl had nothing on her, no phone and no wallet. As Ellyn pulled her hand back, the girl shifted, throwing her arm to the side to reveal something written on her skin. Ellyn pulled out her phone and used it as a flashlight, making out the words "IF FOUND PLEASE CALL," scrawled in black Sharpie. Next to the words was a phone number.

Ellyn stared at the girl's arm for a minute, wondering what kind of person marked themselves like a dog or a piece of luggage. She frowned, but punched the number into her phone. She listened to four rings, and then a voicemail.

"Hi! You've reached Becky, I'm not here right now but if you leave a message I'll totally get right back to you!"

*Now what?* Ellyn wondered. But the voicemail wasn't finished.

"Oh, and if you have Sarah, the brunette girl who has this number written on her arm? Bring her to 107 Prairie View, apartment B. Thanks!"

Ellyn quickly hung up the phone. She dialed the number again and got the same voicemail. She looked around. She needed help. Glancing back at the bar, she wondered how terrible a person she would be if she left the girl here for a few minutes. The girl, Sarah, was clearly not going anywhere, and the street was pretty much abandoned. Ellyn dragged Sarah back a little bit and propped her against a wall. "Um, sorry."

She sprinted back into the building, looking for Alex and Mark. She circled the bar three times, checking every corner, pounding on the bathroom door until a disgruntled girl yelled at her, but she couldn't find either of them anywhere. She described them to the bouncer, who vaguely remembered them hopping into a cab earlier.

*Unbelievable*, Ellyn thought, hurrying back to the unconscious girl. She stared at the black screen of her phone, its charge depleted. Even if it was working, who could she call to help? The few friends she had from class would probably be in bed by now, like sane people. Her parents couldn't do anything from three states away. Alex was gone and probably wasn't in any condition to help anyways.

Ellyn sat down, leaning against the same wall as the unconscious girl. She didn't know what was more depressing: the fact that this girl's friend hadn't answered the phone, or that Ellyn didn't even have anyone whose number she could write on her arm.

"There you are."

Ellyn jumped at the dark figure who suddenly appeared on her left.

"Mark?" she said, her heart picking up pace as she scrambled to her feet. "I thought you left?"

"Alex got drunk, she needed to go home. I got her a cab, and offered to stay behind to look for you. Make sure you got back all right."

Ellyn was surprised. It was an actually thoughtful gesture. But when she looked around at the empty streets she couldn't help but do the math. Two vulnerable girls plus one sketchy man equals something very not good.

"My phone died," she explained. Mark just nodded, leaning against the wall with his hands in his pocket, watching her.

"Is your friend okay?" he asked, motioning towards the girl as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes.



“She’s not my friend,” Ellyn said, realizing how callous it sounded. She opened her mouth, but couldn’t quite find the words to explain. Instead all that came out was, “I’m just trying to figure out how to get her home.”

Mark regarded her thoughtfully, chewing on his unlit cigarette. Ellyn found herself engaged in a dubious staring contest with him. Finally he broke her gaze and looked around. “Well, I can take you home.”

Ellyn opened her mouth to give an automatic “I’m fine thanks,” before realizing that she wasn’t, in fact, fine. She had no ride, a dead phone, an unconscious girl at her feet, and it was starting to get cold. Ellyn didn’t have the luxury to refuse his offer, so with a sigh she nodded.

Mark pulled his car around and helped Ellyn lift Sarah into the back. Ellyn sat stiffly in the front seat, her hands clutching her useless phone. They rode in silence, which Ellyn thought was odd and strangely unnerving. But she couldn’t bring herself to break it. Every time she tried her teeth ended up biting down on her lip. Instead she stared fixedly at her ghoulish reflection in the window.

When they pulled up in front of her apartment building, however, she couldn’t help but squeak, “Wait, why are we here?”

“This is where you live,” Mark said calmly, as if speaking to a three-year-old.

“But what about her?”

“You gave me the address, Prairie Drive or whatever. I’ll get her back.”

Ellyn wasn’t convinced. “You want me to just leave her with you?”

“Why not?”

Ellyn regretted opening her mouth. “Just...I don’t even know you.”

“But you don’t really know her either. What if she’s an axe murderer?”

Ellyn’s eyes widened. Was he trying to be funny? Mark slowly rolled his cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other.

Ellyn looked back at the passed out girl sleeping peacefully in the backseat. Mark did have a point. She didn’t know this girl. Why was it her responsibility to make sure she got home safe? Ellyn was tired. She hadn’t wanted to go out in the first place, and Alex had ditched her the first moment she got. Ellyn thought of her bed, her nice, comfortable apartment not five yards away. She was so close to slipping out of these heinous heels and crawling into her soft bed.

“You’re sure you’ll take her straight home?”

“Ellyn, would you stop being so paranoid?”

Ellyn searched his face, making notes of his features. Short, dark hair. Hazel eyes. Medium sized nose. Square jaw. Mole on the left side of his chin. She repeated this description silently, as though describing him to a police sketch artist. “Fine. Remember it’s 107 Prairie View, apartment B.”

Mark nodded. “I got it. See you around, Ellyn.”

Ellyn lumbered out of the car, watching his car lights disappear into the shadows of the long, dark street. She stood on the sidewalk, shivering, trying so hard to convince herself to just go inside and forget about everything. She pictured two cartoonish figures on her shoulders, one urging her to do the right thing and go get the girl back from Mark, and the other insisting that her job was done and it was time to go to bed.

As Ellyn turned and walked into the apartment, she wasn’t sure which voice to listen to. When she entered, she saw Alex passed out on her bed, blissfully unaware of

what was going on. Ellyn hesitated in the doorway, watching Alex's serene form breathe. With a sudden groan, Ellyn grabbed her keys, shoved her feet into more comfortable sneakers, and backtracked out of the apartment.

It couldn't hurt just to check and make sure Mark brought her back, Ellyn thought as she turned onto Prairie View. She could just make sure Sarah was all right, and then go back home and never think about this ever again.

Ellyn quickly parked across the street and ran up a flight of stairs to apartment B. She gave three short, timid knocks before gluing her hand to her side. Several heartbeats passed but no one answered the door. Ellyn hesitated, then knocked again, listening intently. She thought she heard movement inside, but the door remained closed. She glanced down. The crack under the door wasn't dark, but nor did it reveal an inviting light. She pressed her ear against the door. Were those footprints? Or just her own blood pounding? Ellyn tried the handle but it was locked. Maybe Sarah's friends had taken her to the hospital. Maybe they were tucking her into bed and couldn't hear the door. Maybe Mark had murdered everyone, or maybe he was never here at all.

A hundred scenarios ran through her head, but none offered any solutions. Ellyn knocked again, louder, more demanding, because it made her feel like she was doing something. She beat on the door, loud thumps, wondering if she was in one of those nightmares, calling out for help, but not making a sound. Breathing heavy, she finally lowered her bruised knuckles and stumbled backwards. She turned to leave, feeling like she was going to throw up. She took two steps, and inside the apartment, a light flicked on.

UNITED

Traffic stands still but the clock doesn't. With each passing minute my temper shortens, and the crowded highway appears more and more like an omen, telling me to turn around. But I'm already in a dress, and my hair is done, so why would I waste all that time I spent getting ready just to watch Jimmy Fallon in the hotel room? Besides, turning back now would just be cowardly, and I am anything but. I keep up this string of encouragement, hoping to convince myself that everything will be okay.

I'm already late. Maria assured me no one would blame me if I didn't show up, but that makes me want to be there all the more. I was the one who defied others' expectations. I was the one who did crazy shit just for the hell of it. How could I disappoint Carmel High's class of 2004 on a night such as this?

I turn up the music to fill the silence, and my fingers dance the can-can on the steering wheel. Alec and Maria will be there, I remind myself, so at least I won't be wandering around like the loner I was senior year. They weren't really *my* friends, though. They were Jenna's, and I know that no matter how nice they are to me, it still feels wrong that I am the one who will be there tonight, not her.

Forty minutes late. By now the rumors about me are probably flying. Well, I hope they're interesting at least. Even though I haven't seen my ex-classmates for years, I am well versed in the clichés of their lives. The divorcees, the sellouts, the success stories, and the failures. The minute I got the invitation in the mail I knew exactly who would come and what they would say.

There's more in store for me than polite, catch-up small talk. For me it will be accepting condolences and trying to avoid the confusion in their eyes. Because I wasn't

supposed to make it to 10 years. Jenna was the good twin, the one who was supposed to show up as the soccer mom slash attorney with a hundred babies and a big, expensive ring on her finger. I'm the twin who spent most of her twenties in and out of rehab.

I finally inch down the exit ramp toward blessedly clear streets. When I reach the hotel, I throw my keys at the valet and walk as quickly as I can in heels to the ballroom. I stop at a mirror in the lobby and shudder. Black hair pulled back tight, green eyes peering out over rosy cheeks, pink instead of black nailpolish. I look like Jenna. We were twins, so it shouldn't be surprising. But since she died I've had trouble looking in the mirror, afraid to find her staring back at me.

It never used to be like that. For most of our lives we were complete opposites. I did everything I could to separate myself from her. Not out of contempt; I loved her more than anything. But I couldn't stand being lumped into the same person. Jenna and Alyssa, two halves of the same entity. Jenna and Alyssa, the perfect little set. I was never cut out for perfection.

I frown and pull my hair out of its bun. I run my fingers through it, scrunching it a bit, before pulling eyeliner from my purse. A couple swoops of dark pencil and I look a little more like my old self.

A huge banner screaming "Welcome Hornets Class of 2004!" greets me at the ballroom entrance. Luminous yellow and black balloons float above a huge picture of the cover our senior yearbook. I push through a waterfall of shimmery streamers and take a step back in time.

Usher plays too loudly over the speakers, and all lights are off except the disco ball and the dim lamps on the banquet tables. Older, better-dressed versions of my high

school classmates congregate around the room. A decade has passed, but they still cluster in the same lunchroom cliques they did back then. The jocks by the banquet table flirt with the cheerleaders; Sammy, the class clown, and the rest of his gang try to outdo each other on the dance floor; the quiet, smart kids huddle around the edges of the tables, drinking wine and talking about all the degrees they've earned; the forgotten others mingle throughout the ballroom, showing off baby pictures and wedding rings and making awkward conversations with people they haven't seen in years.

The first flutters of anxiety hit me as I realize I don't belong with any of them. My old friend group isn't there to welcome me back into its fold because my friend group pretty much consisted of Jenna. The few people I spent time with sulking outside the cafeteria aren't here (I vaguely remember one or two of them going to prison). I spy Abby, who used to sit with me at pep rallies and make fun of everyone else. In high school she only wore the color brown and spent most of her time writing poetry about bats. Now she's in the corner, hand in hand with a tall, handsome man, looking like she belongs in a J.Crew catalog instead of out in the woods with a net. We make eye contact, but she quickly looks away.

At this promising start, I have the urge to leave, but I clench my fist and force myself forward. I refuse to haunt the edge of the party. Refuse to let Batty Abby make me feel like a loser. I search the crowd for Alec and Maria, and finally find them in the corner by the buffet table. I exhale with relief, and head straight towards them. As I get closer, however, I see who they're talking to, and stop in my tracks. It's too late, though. Maria has already spotted me.

“Alyssa!” Maria squeals. She runs forward and pulls me into a big hug. “We didn’t think you’d make it.”

“L.A. traffic. It’s a bitch.”

Maria giggles, and I’m reminded of why my sister liked her so much. Jenna was always positive, like sunshine, and Maria is one of those people who takes the slightest bit of joy and reflects it like a mirror. She is slim and beautiful, with dark hair, tanned skin, and almond colored eyes. She used to be a cheerleader, but the nice kind – the kind who did a lot of volunteer work and smiled a lot. She was always sweet to me in high school, though I was never certain whether it was genuine, or because of Jenna. She fluttered around our house from sophomore to senior year, sleeping over and going out with Jenna and always inviting me despite the fact that I rarely accepted. She was the first person outside the family that I called after Jenna’s death. I had been wary when she offered to help with the funeral arrangements. I wasn’t sure how our relationship would be without my sister, but she turned out to be a saving angel. I wouldn’t have made it through the dark weeks without her, and now I might even consider her a friend.

I take a deep breath, raising my eyes to greet the two men before me.

“Hey guys.”

Maria’s husband Alec doesn’t hesitate. He throws one arm around me and gives me a squeeze. “We’re really glad you made it tonight Alyssa,” he says.

I try not to think about our sophomore Winter Formal when we were caught making out in the girls’ swim team locker room. But it’s clear that’s the furthest thing from anyone’s mind. I clear my throat.

“As if I could miss all this glamour,” I say, motioning towards the cheap bumble bee decorations and tacky disco ball.

Alec and Maria chuckle, but quiet as the last member of our party clears his throat.

“Hi Alyssa,” Stephen says, his eyes looking past me, as if the space over my shoulder is incredibly interesting.

I swallow. “Hi Stephen.”

I can’t believe he came tonight. If I had known he was going to be here...but maybe he’s thinking the same thing about me. He’s been avoiding me for the past few weeks, and, though hurt, I’ve respected his distance. I glance around the unfriendly room. I can’t bear the thought of leaving the only friendly people I know here, but it might be best if I walk away, and let him try to salvage his night.

Before I can move, someone comes up from behind me and throws an arm around my waist.

“I’ll be damned, Alyssa Sampson! Holy shit, you look great!”

Brian Delorean leans in and kisses my cheek with breath that smells like beer. I grimace, forcing myself not to wipe his spit from my cheek.

“Good to see you Brian,” I say flatly.

“Wow, Alyssa Sampson, what happened? What have you been doing? Hey, I was so sorry to hear about Jenna.” He grips my arm and nods seriously, as if we are in some sort of agreement about something.



I try to be nice and smile, but his eyes are roaming the front of my dress and it's hard not to slap him. Instinctively I step back, almost bumping into Stephen. Stephen ignores me, and steps forward, partially blocking me as he sticks out his hand.

“Brian, good to see you.”

“Oh, uh, hi. And you are?” Brian asks as he shakes Stephen's hand.

“Stephen Hurkle. We had freshman biology together.”

“Oh wow yeah, Stephen! Boy, I didn't recognize you. I must be drunker than I realized.” He lets out a billowing laugh that's louder than it needs to be. Stephen steps back, his arm brushing against mine. Brian's eyes dart between the two of us. “So you two, huh?”

In the silence that follows his remark, I don't breathe. I count in my head, an old trick I learned in therapy. The silence lasts for fifteen beats. My heart pumps wildly the entire time as I try not to look at Stephen.

Stephen finally clears his throat. “Ah, actually, I was engaged to Jenna.”

Brian's eyes widen. “Aw shit man, I'm so...”

“Hey, Alyssa, we should go check out the yearbook wall!” Maria jumps in quickly, cutting Brian off.

I nod my head, thanking her with my eyes. She takes my arm and we head to the wall, the men trailing after us. As we walk, Maria jumps into a long list of information she's collected from the first half of the night, and I have to say, I'm pretty impressed by her thoroughness. Within the first hour she's discovered who's an alcoholic (three ex-football players), who had plastic surgery (the valedictorian), and who is pregnant with a married man's baby (the student body president). None of her news surprises. In fact,

these clichéd stories annoy me. Why couldn't anyone here spice it up and land in jail for smuggling drugs or arson, instead of tax evasion like the captain of the soccer team? Anything that might pull the attention away from my tragic story.

But I give more interest to her news than I normally would. I'm trying desperately not to think about Stephen standing two feet behind us, and the guilt that permeates my core. I should have been nicer to him. I should have hugged him or something, not acted so shy and embarrassed. It's not his fault we didn't really know each other. I had already moved to New York when he and Jenna reconnected and started dating. When she called to tell me the news of their engagement, I could only conjure up a vague image of a lacrosse player with slightly buck teeth. I had been looking forward to getting to know him until everything happened. Now, he could hardly stand to be in the same room as me.

The yearbook wall is a literal walk down memory lane invented by people who don't believe a high school reunion is cruel and embarrassing enough already. Here, the committee has blown up all of our senior yearbook pictures and quotes so people can laugh and pretend they aren't mortified.

We find Maria's gorgeous headshot with the caption, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," next to Alec's dorky grin and the lyric, "I think to myself, what a wonderful world." I skip over the faces I remember and the ones I don't, finding more amusement in the clichéd quotes than the grainy photos. Stephen's picture is near the middle, a goofy but handsome kid with the words "Home is behind, the world ahead." At first I'm surprised that he chose such a sentimental quote, until I see it's from *Lord of the Rings*.

My portrait appears at the end of the line. I pause in front of it, and examine the girl with the messy hair, scowl, and Nirvana quote: “I wish I was like you, easily amused.”

There’s a low whistle at my elbow and I jump. Stephen stands behind me, examining my picture. My face heats up.

“I know, it’s bad. I was a little...cynical.”

“It’s not as embarrassing as quoting a hobbit, though, is it?”

I laugh breathlessly, before daring to look at him. Though his eyes don’t meet mine, his face is kind.

“I don’t remember much about you from high school,” he continued, staring at the portrait. “I was a little too wrapped up in sports to care about girls. Jenna used to tell me some stories but, well, you know Jenna. She put a positive spin on everything.”

“Yeah,” I say, though I have no idea how she could have possibly made my high school years seem anything less than horrifying.

But I relax slightly. He said her name and neither of us flinched. Maybe tonight won’t be so bad after all. We keep moving down the line, all of us stopping simultaneously when we reach the banner that says *Never Forget*.

And there she is. My Jenna, immortalized in glossy printer paper next to the guy who killed himself six years ago and the girl who had cancer. High school Jenna is beautiful, her hair smooth, make up perfect, grinning above a quote that reads, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Eleanor Roosevelt. Jenna spent weeks picking the line, poring over dusty poetry books and historical speeches to find the perfect line. Even so, I can’t help but think it’s complete bullshit.

Everyone has beautiful dreams. Everyone believes in a better future, but not everyone gets one.

Stephen and I stand side by side, silently staring. Alec and Maria have the tact to keep walking, lightly discussing the quotes of the people further down the line. I glance at Stephen out of the corner of my eye, shocked to see a few tears shimmering in his eyes. I think of how my mother used to claim that salt water cures everything. As children, Jenna and I took doses of warm salt water for every ailment, from sore throats to ingrown toenails. *It has healing properties*, my mother would insist, shaking a large can of Morton's over the kitchen sink.

*Not always*, I think, remembering how no amount of crying in the past few weeks has made anything better.

I feel like I should hold Stephen's hand, hug him, comfort him, or something. But before I can, two people sidle up behind us.

"It's such a shame," a sugary voice says. "She was the sweet one. Life just isn't fair. Bad things happen to the good ones."

I freeze, not daring to move. Stephen continues to stare at Jenna, and I think maybe he didn't hear, but the voices don't stop.

"I heard she was killed by a drunk driver. Talk about irony, after everything she did to get her sister off that stuff. Guess it's just bad karma."

Stephen stiffens, and before I know what I'm doing, I spin around, knowing before I do who will be behind me.

"Mary Liz," I say through gritted teeth. "How are you?"

Mary Liz Kinney goes pale as milk as her eyes flutter between my face and the identical portrait of my dead sister. She laughs nervously.

“Alyssa Sampson, bless my heart! How are you dear?”

Mary Liz’s hair is fake blond and she smells like cheap perfume. In high school she was the worst kind of archenemy, simply because she would never admit we were enemies. No matter how much I lashed out at her, she continued to shovel her fake sympathy down my throat. Jenna was friendly to her, but admitted to me once that she thought Mary Liz was like a fruitcake: pretty to look at but sour to the taste.

“I am so sorry to hear about your poor sister. We were just saying it was such a tragedy, weren’t we, Peter?”

She nudges Peter Kinney, her husband and high school water polo star. He nods, mimicking her somber expression for a second, before catching sight of the cocktail waitress across the room. Mary Liz tightens her grip on his arm and smiles brightly at me and Stephen.

“Is this your...?”

“Mary Liz, you remember Stephen Hurkle don’t you? Lacrosse player, Jenna’s fiancé,” I say quickly, not wanting to hear someone call Stephen my date again.

“Oh Stephen! You poor thing, I am so sorry for your loss. If there is anything I can do for you and your poor family...”

“Thank you,” Stephen says tersely. He takes my arm. “We better take our seats. Nice to meet you.”

Stephen and I maneuver through tables to meet Alec and Maria in the corner. Behind us Mary Liz whispers quickly in Peter’s ear as he takes a swig of his Scotch. I

expect familiar feelings of hate and disgust to well up, but instead I just feel tired.

Stephen, however, looks pissed.

“What horrible people,” he says, and I can’t help but grin slightly.

“Sit down everyone! Everyone grab a seat at a table, we’re about to begin!” Holly Pletkovich, our elected class representative, takes the microphone in the middle of the dance floor as we find seats at a table in the corner.

“All right, Carmel High class of 2004, welcome! It’s hard to believe that ten years have flown by so quickly, but I’m so happy to see all of your faces here tonight! We’re a little older, a little wiser, but inside, we’re all the same old Hornets we were a decade ago.”

“What a depressing thought,” I say to Stephen under my breath. He snorts.

“We’re going to start by going through our Senior Most Likely list and see where they are now! Won’t that be fun?” Everyone stares at her, but she continues unabashed. “So just come up here, we have little treats for you!” She motions to a stack of cookies in the shape of hornets. “We’ll start with Most Likely to be President! We have Jo Alice Hawking and Mitchell Tier! Jo Alice is now president of the Dallas Junior League, and Mitchell is a lawyer, both so successful, so I guess in a way we were right.”

More polite laughter. Mitchell waves at the audience good naturedly, but Jo Alice keeps her arms crossed and her lips pursed as she accepts her cookie. Something heavy sets in the back of my head, but I can’t quite identify it. My heart picks up pace.

“Next up is the Most Likely to Marry Your High School Sweetheart! I think we all know where this is going...Peter and Mary Liz Kinney!”

The applause is weaker this time, as Mary Liz stands and forces Peter to his feet. She clutches his arm and smiles like a beauty pageant queen, while he shuffles beside her, looking more interested in his empty drink than the cookies.

“Yes the happy couple is still together, with two beautiful children.” Holly pats her heart as if overcome by emotion. “Our next category is...Most Genuine.”

My heart stutters and I finally recognize what I am feeling. Dread.

“Connor Gates!”

She doesn't say Jenna's name. Everyone notices the omission and a ripple of whispers rolls through the room. I don't dare look at Stephen. I can feel tension radiating off of his body from across the table. In the corner, Connor Gates lumbers to his feet, smiling humbly as he moves forward to take his cookie.

“Okay, our next category...” Holly rushes to move on.

“Wait!” Connor interrupts her. “I'd like to make a toast!”

Holly freezes. This interruption was not part of her program. Connor carefully pulls the microphone from her grip, patting her on the back with a small smile. Like the rest of the crowd, Connor hasn't changed much in 10 years. He's more handsome than he was in high school, with a full head of blond hair and a white smile. He's also nice. The sickening kind of nice that I used to make fun of in high school: the defenseless kind that makes you feel guilty for not returning the sentiment.

He clears his throat and gives the crowd a bittersweet smile. “Someone else should be here, accepting this award with me tonight. A very special girl, who was taken from us far too soon.”

Eighty pairs of eyes go straight to our table, but no one speaks. I clench my fists in my lap under the table, and don't dare move for fear of attracting more attention to myself. It doesn't work. Connor's eyes lock on me and he strides over. He drags me to my feet, and puts an arm around me, giving me a firm embrace that makes my whole body stiffen. My nose is filled with his shoulder and I'm about to suffocate, but beneath it all the action feels...genuine. Somehow that makes it worse.

He finally pulls back to gauge my reaction. The whole ballroom holds its breath. "Alyssa, I am so sorry for your loss. We all know how special Jenna was."

I cross my arms so no one sees my hands shaking. I can't sit down, can't run. I feel caught between heartbeats. I refuse to blink or even move. I can't cry in front of these people. I am tough Alyssa, strong Alyssa, cynical Alyssa. I refuse to add emotional Alyssa to the list.

"I remember, when we were freshman and I first found out you two were twins I was like 'No way!'" He chuckles, his arm still around my shoulders. "I thought there couldn't be two more different twins in the world. Jenna was so lovely, and you...you were just a troublemaker. Like that time you were caught smoking in the girls' bathroom with three basketball players from Shepherd High? Or when you crashed that car into Cameron Maple's backyard because he hadn't invited you to his party! God you were a crazy one."

Is this speech meant to be comforting? I stare out into the audience and realize that they aren't silent out of pity or respect. They're waiting to see what Alyssa Sampson, school basket case, will do next. Will she make a scene? Resort to her signature sarcasm?



Will she finally break? I'm sure my face must be pleading. Can't they see I'm not that girl anymore? But a sea of stoic faces just sit there and watch me drown.

“But that's the past, I guess. And you were her sister. So on behalf of the entire class, I want you to have this.”

He shoves his cookie into my hand and steps back. My fingers wrap automatically around the cheap, gold bag, slightly crushing the hornet's wing. Nobody moves.

My junior year of high school I won an award for the paintings I made for the annual art show. It came as a big surprise to everyone, including me, when they called my name at the end of the year award ceremony. Light applause, whispered snickers, looks of confusion surrounded me as I shuffled awkwardly to the stage. I maintained my outward scowl, but inside I was glowing. I had never won an award before. Jenna's accomplishments littered her bedroom, but I had never done anything good to set myself apart.

“The teachers just did it because they feel sorry for her,” someone said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

I didn't know who said it, didn't want to know. I told myself it wasn't true, that I deserved the award. But the look on the principal's face when she handed me the certificate was one of such simpering sweetness, that I suddenly hated her. I hated her for calling me out, for making me look like a fool in front of everybody. But mostly I hated myself for getting excited for the stupid little award.

When I took the certificate I made a show of tearing it up. I smiled in her face, curtsied to the crowd, and stalked off stage.

I could do that now. Throw the cookie in Connor's face and flee. Make a sarcastic remark. Punch someone. If Jenna were here she'd tell me what she told me back then when she found me crying in the girls' restroom. She told me to take a deep breath, count to ten, and let it go – to be calm and gracious and, for once in my life, a little humble. I hadn't followed her advice back then. I trashed the art show the next night and was suspended for two weeks.

I did a lot of things that hurt Jenna back then but she never once made me feel ashamed. She never yelled at me for embarrassing her, though at times she must have felt humiliated. Instead she was always thinking about how she could make me feel better.

I take a deep breath. Jenna's not here to tell me to calm down. To tell me not to mock Connor's attempt at sympathy or reduce Holly to tears by ruining her meticulously planned event. She's not here to make me feel better. I may have been the crazy twin but Jenna was certainly the stronger of us. So, I draw on her strength and try, for the first time, to be like her.

"Thank you, Connor," I say, stepping out of his embrace. "And thank you to the rest of Carmel High, Class of '04. Jenna loved you all, and I know how much she would have loved to be here tonight."

I give them a demure smile. The kind Jenna would give. I sit back down and cross my legs, fixing my eyes over the surprised faces. My eyes lock with Jenna's portrait and I stare at it fixedly until Holly regains her composure.

"Well I...well! Thank you Connor, very well said. Um, yes, the next category..."

"Are you all right?"

Stephen leans over, whispering out of the corner of his mouth. It takes me a minute to reply.

“I’m fine. Are you?”

Stephen shrugs with a half smile. “It’s not the worst night I’ve had in the past few weeks.” His face grows serious and he leans forward. I look up surprised as his eyes bore into mine. They’re a nice shade of hazel. “I know you probably don’t need to hear this, but Jenna would have been so proud of you.”

I nod, unable to break eye contact, even as Holly starts leading the rest of the ballroom in our school anthem. Everyone around us stands, but we stay seated, neither of us blinking as our classmates begin to sing in various pitches, a broken harmony.

## THE WAITING WAR

My son has nightmares. It's not uncommon for four-year-olds, but instead of monsters or ghosts, he dreams of my wife. He runs into the living room one hot August night, crying and clutching his yellow blanket, and throws himself into my lap. I pull him close and his arms move up to my neck, clasping onto me with childish strength. Dolores rises from the armchair opposite me, reaching for him as her grandmotherly instincts kick in, but I shake my head.

"I got him," I say with a small smile, rubbing circles into his heaving back. She nods, worry in the lines of her face, and sits back down as I carry him into my room.

The other kids had nightmares too, and I know how to handle them now: walk them back to bed, check Rosie's closet for monsters, pour James a glass of water, kiss them good night, return to sleep. Simple.

But Thomas is different. Words and water don't soothe him. He hates being alone, so most nights I let him sleep on her side of the bed. I tuck him in, smoothing brown strands of hair across his sweaty forehead. His eyes are already flickering shut as I settle in with a book. I flip through the pages, not really seeing the words, as Thomas curls into a ball and falls asleep almost instantly.

Dolores moves around the living room, probably cleaning something, and I am glad that everyone else is finally gone. Not that it hasn't been nice having people around the past three days; worry loves company or something like that. But the visitors haven't stopped coming since we got the news. Family – *her* family – has swarmed the house day and night, making food, watching the news, comforting one another, and invading every aspect of my life.

But Gabi's family has always been there. When we first married, their constant presence took me by surprise. My father and I had never been close. He and his wife called from time to time but saved their visits for every other holiday. Gabi's family, by contrast, was a mass of cousins and aunts and uncles and all manner of extended kin whose names I could never remember or pronounce. When Gabi went on her tours, they filled our house with noise and Mexican food until I thought I would explode. Gabi's mother Dolores especially took it upon herself to care for my family while her daughter was away. Her "smothering mothering" as Gabi called it, took me aback at first. But I would take it over Gabi's style any day.

When we heard about the attack, when we saw the news report that brought our week to a standstill, Dolores came straight to the house and she hasn't left since. Every morning she paces the living room with the phone pressed to her ear, trying to call the emergency hotline, while children and family members congregate in every room of the house. Over and over again, for three days straight, she anxiously dials the service number by heart, hoping to hear anything besides static and the automated voice telling us the line is disconnected.

"Díos!" Dolores's hiss of frustration carries into the back bedroom. Her tiny figure storms in, phone in hand. "This is ridiculous," she says. Her eyes widen at the sight of Thomas's sleeping body and she lowers her voice. "They gave us this number to call in case of an emergency, and then, when there's a real emergency, no one picks up!"

Her angry whisper is comical, but I don't laugh. Sometimes Dolores looks so much like Gabi it surprises me. She is a small and fierce Mexican woman, exactly how I

picture my wife in thirty years. Her hair is graying, her face lined with worry, and her limbs thinner but when I look at her, I see the future Gabi and I may not have.

“They’re busy,” I say, as I’ve been saying the past three days. “We don’t know the extent of the damage yet. They’re probably trying to sort through what happened. No calls in, no calls out.”

“It’s stupid,” she persists. “You’d think they could take a minute to let the families know their children are all right.”

I stare at her. I learned years ago that arguing with Dolores is like trying to walk through a brick wall. She shakes her head and sits on the edge of the bed as she starts to dial the number again. I sigh.

“Dolores, you should go home.”

Her dark eyes snap up. “What? Leave you?”

“Everyone’s asleep and you should be too. You can’t tell me you’ve had a decent night’s sleep on that pullout couch since you got here. You should go home, sleep in your own bed.”

“I can’t just leave you, mijo. What about the babies?”

“The babies are fine. You can leave now and be back before they even wake up. I think I can handle the quiet house tonight.”

Her back relaxes, and she passes a tiny hand over her face. For the first time in days her carefully built exterior cracks to reveal remnants of her fragility.

“Sí, I should go home.” Then, fierce again, she thrusts the phone into my hands. “Keep dialing. If you keep calling, they will pick up, okay mijo?”

My fingers automatically curl around the phone she presses into my hand. She kisses my forehead, strokes Thomas's hair, and then shuffles out of the room. I hear her collecting her things in the living room, probably straightening a lamp or folding another blanket. Later, the bright headlights of her car sweep across the window, and I'm alone for the first time in days.

I set the phone on the nightstand and ignore it. I don't believe in calling; that's never been my way. Instead, I wait for her. I've been waiting for Gabi since we met. At first, I waited for her to notice me, then I waited for her to go out with me, then I waited for her to marry me, then I waited for her to come home, and all that waiting brought me here, to more waiting.

I look at Thomas. Of all my children, he is most like her. His eyelashes are long and when opened his eyes are as dark as coffee. He has her infectious laugh, which constantly echoes through the house, as he finds everything from dragonflies to paper towels funny. Of all my children, he misses her most. This tour is the first time she's left since he has been old enough to recognize her absence. The last time she went he was a baby, barely walking. But now the word "Mama" means more to him than just nonsense. Now it fills him with longing, sadness, and confusion.

The older two are used to her six-month absences. They are used to a single-parent household, to making their own lunches and taking the bus to school. She is a passenger on their life trains, getting on and off regularly while I, the engineer, stay aboard, doing my best not to crash.

My oldest son, James, is ten now. He has watched his mother come and go his entire life. He has cried and missed her and pretended to be brave and fulfilled his duty as

the strong older brother. He has done this because I told him to. Told him he must set the example; that his mother is doing her job to protect the family and he must do his. He has always trusted me, until recently.

These days he goes to school and learns about war. He learns that war is not always as simple as good guys protecting the weak and innocent. He learns about diseases and bombs and death tolls and chemical warfare and terrorists. He comes home and glares at me with accusatory eyes. He is mad. Mad at me for not telling him the dark truth about war. Mad at her for leaving.

This afternoon I came into the kitchen to avoid Dolores and one of Gabi's cousins bickering about how to arrange the furniture. James stood by the refrigerator, informing his siblings that Mommy is killing people. She's dropping bombs on villages and shooting up bad guys and crashing planes into buildings. She'll probably die too, because that's what people do in wars.

I yelled at him to stop, that he was scaring them. But he stared at me with an impassive expression that stopped my heart. I ordered him to his room and he left without another word, not emerging for the rest of the night.

Rosie and Thomas watched me with wide eyes, so to calm them I told them what I always tell them. Mommy is working. She is doing her duty to our country. She is making the world a safer place to live in. She is protecting them, like other mommies do, though from farther away. Content, they went back to playing with their cousins. They trust me, a fact that has caused me no small amount of guilt over the years.



I slip out of bed and go into the living room. I don't want my turbulent thoughts to seep into Thomas's dreams. I take the phone with me and set it on the coffee table as I settle into my chair in the corner. I drum my fingers on my knee.

Today is not the first time we've been unable to reach her. The service is spotty over there, and not two months ago a sandstorm knocked out the phones for a week. But this time it's different. This time we have direct confirmation that her base was hit by a series of bombs. I pick up the day-old newspaper from the coffee table. The front page shows a picture of tanks in a desert landscape. I've memorized the article by now, and still I don't know what actually happened. Suicide bombs, extensive damage, multiple casualties but no names. What does that really tell us anyways? I turn it face down. I take deep breaths and stare at the shadows collecting behind the furniture.

When I married Gabi, I knew I was signing up for a lifetime of being fearful. I knew there was a good chance I would become a widower within a year. I knew we might never have children, and that if we did I might have to raise them alone. I was so in love with her that I didn't care. I would take six months of fear for six months of bliss. At least that's what I told everyone, and I had said it so many times over the years that it started to become true.

Missing her hurts, but it is an ache so threaded into my life that I barely notice it anymore. I got used to making lists of things that happened between our rare phone calls, so that I could fill her in on everything. Rosie held a duckling at preschool. I was late to work, and I missed her. Dolores dyed her hair, again. I stubbed my toe on the refrigerator and I missed her. James got an A on a book report. I lost my car keys. And I missed her.

That's what the lists became; my missing her between every other breath. I tried to remember everything for her, but memory was a poor substitute for a mother, and neither of us could ignore the growing resentment in my voice as I read through list after list. Mothers should stay with their children – I believed in this logic since my own mother died when I was six. Mothers should be at home. I wasn't a chauvinist, but when I'd imagined my wife having a career, multiple combat tours overseas was not what I'd had in mind.

I'd accepted this life. I loved her, so how could I not? She felt so passionate about her duties, and that passion had drawn me to her in the first place. To keep her, I slipped into this routine of waiting and missing and list-making, and pretended it was normal.

She finished her contract when James was five and Rosie two. She came home with all her bags like a stranger, but quickly fell back into our lives. After a year, she was pregnant again and we were overjoyed. We repainted the nursery and picked out names and got to experience the joy of being parents together. For a brief time, we were happy. When I think about those months we had together, I think about Rosie's third birthday.

"We're going on a picnic," Gabi declared that morning, slamming a wicker basket on the counter where the kids were watching cartoons.

"A picnic?" I said dubiously.

"Look at them, David. Just sitting there watching that soul-sucking machine. They need fresh air. We live in a place where we can step outside our house without worrying about one of them getting hurt. We should take advantage of it."

Gabi had all sorts of ideas like this. She was intent on making our kids enjoy the things that kids in the Middle East could not. Education, clean water, vaccination,

picnics. Dolores and I visited a counselor who was supposed to help us support Gabi in her transition back to civilian life. He told us that when Gabi had ideas like this, we should encourage her, and just go with it.

It was a sunny day, a breezy 75 degrees with white, fluffy clouds and light that seemed to paint everything in a happy filter. Rosie toddled around the grassy park, picking dandelions and laughing while Thomas cooed happily on a picnic blanket next to Gabi and I. James brought a soccer ball and kicked it from one end of the park to the other, stopping every now and then to call our attention to his tricks.

I remember Gabi leaning back, face turned towards the sun, lifting the smiling baby to her chest and I couldn't help but stare and think that this was it, this was true happiness.

"I'm so glad you're home," I said, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

"Mmmm," Gabi murmured, her eyes fluttering close. "We're so lucky, to have days like these. The sun, the silence. On the base everything is loud. Trucks and shouting and beeping machines. Sometimes I sign up for night patrol just to escape to the edge of the fence and sit. The stars are so bright out there, you wouldn't believe it. Not like here in the city where you can't see anything. Out there, I can hear myself think, really think. You know how strange it is to actual focus on the sound of your thoughts?"

I was too mesmerized by her voice to notice she used the present tense. I kissed her hair, her cheeks, her hands, not replying for fear she would stop talking. The war, the killing, the waiting, all seemed like distant memories. We were like every other family, enjoying a beautiful day and having the luxury to forget that our country was fighting a war.

It didn't take me long to realize I was wrong. Not long after the picnic I returned from work to find Gabi sitting in the kitchen, one hand under her chin as she stared out the window. I kissed her cheek and started making dinner.

"I have to go back," she said softly, still staring out the window.

"What's that dear?" I asked above the gushing sink water.

She turned around in her chair, despair in her eyes. "I have to go back."

I froze, my eyes watching the water rush over my hands. "Back where?" I asked calmly, though I knew exactly what she meant.

"I'm going to re-enlist."

I stared at her, coming around the counter to stand in front of her. I took in every inch of her face, from the resolve in her eyes to the stubbornness in her chin. For a second, the strongest desire to kiss her overcame me. But the feeling quickly faded into anger.

"Why? Why would you even say that?"

She exhaled sharply at my tone, her eyes refusing to meet mine.

"Gabi, why?" I barked.

"I can't do this anymore," she said. "This happy, suburban wife thing. I've tried, really, I have. I thought I could come back like I have so many other leaves. I thought it would be easy to just let go and enjoy peace. But this is different, it never ends. Every day we get up and we do the same thing over and over and over."

She gestured to the newspaper opened on the table underneath her elbows.

“My team was attacked last night. These are names of people I knew. They’re over there and fighting and it’s like, why does homework or laundry or anything else matter when people are dying?”

“It matters, Gabi. It’s our life.”

“No it’s your life. This was my life.” She waved the newspaper at me.

“Everything else is just...” she quickly trailed off, biting her lip.

“Just what?” I prodded, trying to keep my calm. “Just what, Gabi?”

She sighed, and after a minute, met my eyes with a steady gaze. “It’s empty.”

I stared at her, dumbfounded, resisting the urge to shake her. How could she think this life was empty? It was anything but empty. It was full: full of dance lessons and school plays and lacrosse tryouts and day care and trips to the zoo and strep throat and bicycle lessons. Every night I went to bed exhausted and fulfilled. How could she not feel the same?

“Well let’s just take some time to think and talk about it...” I tried to be calm.

“I called my recruiting officer today. I could be back in a month.”

I was speechless. The idea that she had already scheduled her return without even consulting me hurt me more than the idea of her leaving. She suddenly stood, moving towards me. “David...”

“No,” I put up a hand to stop her. “Don’t. You went ahead and made this choice? Without even talking to me about it? Of course, because it’s all fine for you. You don’t have to tuck those kids in every night not knowing if their mother is safe. You don’t have to hold them when they cry and try to think of a good enough answer when they ask you why you’re always gone.”

“You think I like that? Knowing that I hurt them and you by leaving? It kills me, every time. But it’s killing me even more to stay.”

She was crying now, a rare crack in her armor. I couldn’t find it in me to point out the irony in her pain. I crumbled, losing my resolve, and took her into my arms. I thought I could fix it. I thought I could build a life worth staying for. I filled her last months with everything I could think of. But in the end, she stood firm, and a month later I stood with the kids in the airport waving goodbye.

Five years later and we are still trapped in this life of waiting. I thought the war would have ended by now, but there’s always some new threat she has to return for. She’s had long breaks at home, we’ve had good days, but they are starting to grow few and far between.

The last time I spoke to Gabi on the satellite phone, I was in the middle of giving her my latest list when I felt her attention waning. I decided to change course and asked her, “Do you remember Rosie’s third birthday?”

“I don’t think I was home for that one,” Gabi said.

“No you were. We went on the picnic, remember? You wanted us to get outside and enjoy the silence. It was so quiet and sunny, remember? It was so peaceful. And we let Thomas have cake for the first time? His face was covered in it.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said hesitantly. “What about it?”

I faltered, wondering why I brought it up in the first place. “I was just thinking...it was nice.”

“Mmmmm, listen, hon, I’ve got to get going we have another sandstorm coming in. Tell the kids I love them, and tell Rosie happy birthday!” That was the last time I heard her voice.

I shake my head. I don’t like thinking about her decision to leave, or mine to stay. Remembering the good times and how quickly they were over. The silence of anticipation eats into me. I keep waiting for the ringing of the phone, and the waiting is driving me mad. Like a pesky mosquito, a thought finds its way into my head and I wonder if it would just be easier if she were gone...if this time were the last time waiting for her.

The thought makes me sick. I know I don’t wish she would never come home, but that such a thought even occurred to me makes me feel like I’ve shot her myself.

I turn on music to drown out my guilt. I keep it low as I switch the CD to our wedding song. The soft chords rush over me as I sit back down and I try to picture her before all of this, back when life was easier. Back when waiting for her was a statement, not a question.

“Dad? What are you doing?”

I start as James enters the room, sleep in his eyes. He shuffles to the couch and plops down, clutching the stuffed puppy he swears he’s too old for.

“Sorry, bud, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He yawns and shakes his head. “I couldn’t sleep anyways.”

“Me neither,” I sigh.

He watches me. I see questions in his eyes and the hesitant rise and fall of his chest, but I don't pry. I close my eyes and tilt my head back, humming along to the music. I have learned by now that I must wait for him to come to me.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"Just listening to music."

"Why?"

"It relaxes me."

"You're just sitting there?"

I open my eyes. He's agitated, but I don't understand why.

"What would you have me do, James?"

"Something, I don't know," he mumbles, sinking lower in his seat and not meeting my eyes. I frown. Whatever this stage of child development is, I'm not a fan.

"James, I don't know what you've been so moody about lately." A lie. "I'm doing the best I can." The truth.

"No you're not you're just sitting there," he retorts. "Like a coward."

"James..."

"You're supposed to be over there!"

I blink at his sudden outburst. "What?"

"You're the dad and she's the mom." He huffs, like it's obvious. "You're supposed to do the fighting, not her."

My standard replies rise to the surface out of habit. "Your mother is serving her country. She's doing her job."



“But it’s not supposed to be her job.” He squirms in his seat, as if I don’t understand him. “It’s supposed to be yours! That’s what everyone at school says. The Dads go to war and the Moms take care of the kids, but you’re just sitting there doing nothing and she could be dying but you don’t even care.”

He glares at me, and I’m too stunned to reply. I’m shocked to hear my own, twisted conscience speaking through my son, hurling accusations that I’ve pinned against myself a hundred times.

“It was your mom’s choice, buddy,” I say slowly. “Not mine, I…”

“You should have stopped her!”

“I couldn’t stop her, James,” I whisper, and it’s the brutal truth. “You think I don’t care? I go crazy worrying about her. I am so scared, all the time, so much that I…”

I break off when I realize he’s crying. Way to go. I struggle to calm myself, regret overtaking the fear momentarily. “I’m sorry, buddy.”

He shakes his head, tears falling faster. “Why? Why did she leave us?”

My heart breaks. “Oh son.”

I move to the couch and pull him into my lap. He curls up and sobs on my chest for the first time in years. I hold him tight, rocking back and forth gently like I do for Thomas. I hold him until he quiets, and then I grip him tighter.

In this moment, I hate her. In this moment, I miss her.

“It was her choice. I won’t pretend to understand why she left, but you should know how much she loves you. She didn’t leave you, she just…had to go.” I find myself using her words. I pull away to look him in the eyes, so he can see the truth written there. “But I love you, and Rosie, and Thomas too, so much. I’m here and I’m not

going anywhere.”

“But Mom...”

“All we can do for your mother is wait and be ready to take care of her when she’s ready.”

He nods and lays his head back on my chest.

We lie there for what feels like hours. My chest rises, his falls, and soon our breaths and heartbeats sync. The last chorus of the wedding song starts, but I’m half asleep. James snores lightly, looking just as peaceful as Thomas. To move now would mean to wake him up, so I resign myself to a night on the couch. I close my eyes, am about to fade like the music, when the sharp ring of the phone pierces the room.

My first instinct is James. My eyes shoot down but he sleeps through the noise. I squint in the dark, searching for the phone. Who would be calling this late? Dolores, to check if I’m holding onto the phone? I peer at the small screen; the number on the caller ID is long and foreign.

I am awake now. Adrenaline shoots through every vein in my body and my breath hitches. I reach out to grab the phone and James stirs, whispering in his sleep. I freeze. The phone rings again, reminding me that she could be on the other end. I reach further, and James mumbles in his sleep, reminding me that she might never be on the other end ever again.

One arm reaches for the phone; the other holds James close to my chest. I reach, he snores, and the phone keeps ringing.

### SEPARATION ANXIETY

I moved out of my house of forty years today. The slate roof, the high bay windows, the crooked front step and all the memories they hold, are now behind me, forever. As I take one last glance, my eyes roving over the freshly planted bougainvilleas, I think of my mother, unexpectedly, for the first time in years. My mother was a superstitious woman. She believed in evil spirits, possession, the devil, and above all, the evil of the number six. I never gave much thought to her ridiculous beliefs, but I can't help but think that it's fitting that I'm moving out today, on June 6, for what could be more evil than saying goodbye?

"Mom? Did you hear what I said?" my daughter Irene asks, turning down the noise coming out of the radio. I named her after the Greek goddess of peace. The name was ironic, however, as Irene transformed from a colicky baby, to a rebellious teenager, and now a strong-willed adult.

"No dear," I admit.

Irene sighs. "I was just saying how excited the kids are to have you move in. Paloma wants to bring you to meet her class on Monday."

"How sweet," I say through pursed lips. She speaks as if leaving my beautiful home and driving three hours away to cram into the suburbs with her and her brood of children is something to celebrate. I shake my head. "But I'm afraid she'll be disappointed, as I'll most likely be dead by Monday."

My daughter stops the car at a red light and glares at me. I catch a glimpse of the wild teenager she once was and shudder. "Mom, we talked about this. The doctors all say you're perfectly healthy. Every test confirmed that."

“Those X-rays cannot capture the soul, darling,” I say, my words weighed down with the wisdom of my years – wisdom that, despite being a mother herself, I cannot imagine my wild Greek goddess ever possessing. “My soul is ripped in half, and no human can live very long after that has happened.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“It’s true, Irene. Your father and I read this study about how the hearts of people who are married for multiple decades are in sync, and that they often die within hours of each other.”

“But Mom, Dad died two weeks ago...”

“Your father is simply taking his time preparing the other side for me. Lord knows your father was many things, but punctual was never one of them.”

Irene takes a deep breath, and I sense more arguments coming, but she merely exhales and continues driving.

An hour later we pull up in front of her white picket house in the suburban nightmare known as Pleasantville. My grandchildren spill out of the front door, cheering and hollering like wild animals.

“Grandma! Grandma!” they exclaim, practically scaling the sides of the car. I abhor the nickname, wondering why Irene didn’t try harder to make them call me “Grandmother” as I preferred.

“Hello, little...dears,” I say. Three curly heads arrange themselves in front of me: Peyton, Parker, and Paloma. How I hate alliteration.

Irene’s husband Brandon follows behind, opening his arms.

“Mary, we are so happy to have you stay with us.” He pulls me into an embrace that threatens to crush my fragile bones.

“Hi Grandma.” Peyton leans in and kisses me on the cheek. Of Irene’s children, he was always my favorite. The oldest and most adventurous of the bunch, he reminds me so much of Walter. He dutifully picks up my bags as I grin and pat his cheek.

“Oh Peyton, thank you for your help. When you unpack the boxes make note of anything you want. I’ll leave it to you when I’m gone.” I wink.

Peyton’s smile falters, his eyes darting to his mother who rolls her own eyes and shrugs.

“Grandma you’re here!” The middle child, Parker, claims my attention with breathless excitement. “We’ve been cleaning the guest room for you for ages! Dad had to move all these boxes to the attic, and he dropped one right down the stairs and smashed this vase and we had to wear shoes around the house for the rest of the day and then...”

“Parker, let your grandmother breathe and help me with her bags,” Brandon interrupts. “Paloma, take your grandmother inside please, sweetheart.”

Paloma’s four-year-old eyes widen with importance as she escorts me into the house. “Gramma, why are you moving in with us?” she half-whispers in a tone that finally shows me the proper respect. It is the tone one uses around those upon their deathbed.

I smile. “It’s just for a little while, dear. Until I join your grandfather in heaven.”

“Oh.” Paloma absorbs this. “When will that be?”

I pat her hand. “Soon, darling. Soon.”

Paloma leads me into the guest room in the back. It's rather small, and normally I would be annoyed, but I know it's not for long. I eye the small bed with the white eyelet lace duvet and think that it looks angelic, the perfect bed on which to fall asleep and never wake up. Paloma disappears and I close the door softly behind her. I set my small carpetbag on the bed and begin pulling out my most prized possessions, the things I want closest to me in my final days.

A few knick knacks first: the jewelry box my parents gave me for my first Communion, a rose captured in glass that I received upon my graduation from high school. But then there are the pictures: Walter and me on our wedding day. As I set the frame down I can't help but think how young and happy we looked back then, even before we knew how many wonderful years and memories were ahead of us.

We met when I was twenty. I was secretary in the admissions office at the all-male college Walter attended, and the two years I spent working there were the best of my childhood. I was young and beautiful, and every boy who made his way through that office stopped to flirt with me. I had engagements every weekend, and was the toast of that small college town. But when I met Walter, all those other boys ceased to matter. Walter was different. Walter had a confidence about him; he had designs for a bright future. When he asked me to dinner one Friday night, I said yes immediately, canceling all other plans for the next few weekends, and then the next forty years.

The next picture I unpack is of Walter and me with our children in front of our new house. I am 35, Walter is 36, Irene is 14 and Walter Junior, our sweet boy, is 10. The house in the background looks no different than it did today when I drove away for the last time. Again, we were oblivious to the joys and pain we would have in that house.

The joy of watching our children grow, the pain of Walter Junior die in an automobile accident when he was 21, the joy of Irene marrying Brandon in the backyard, and so many more moments. Fragments of two lives that made one perfect mosaic.

The final picture, of Walter and me from a month ago, is the last we took together. We flew to Canada for our anniversary. He took me to Lake Louise, where we spent an entire week in luxury. We walked the paths around the lake and laughed over Walter's favorite wine. We twirled around the hotel ballroom every night like two adolescents, showing no sign of our age. His heart pumped vigorously, masterfully hiding the clogged valve that would later claim his life.

Walter remained confident in us until the end. He held my hand in that garden and repeated the vows we'd made forty years before. "We'll be together until the day we die."

We. Not you, not I, not singular, but we. We never had any doubts that our deaths would occur like everything else in our lives: together. One afternoon many years before, Walter had burst into the kitchen waving a newspaper article.

"See, Mary? Science is even saying it now. Folks who live and love together for so long are more likely to go out together in the end."

We read about a couple in Illinois who died within an hour of each other, still holding hands.

"It's just like that movie, the one you like so much. Though I'm still perturbed that you never developed Alzheimer's. I was ready to read to you until you remembered me just to demonstrate the depths of my love."

"Grandma?"

I jump, startled by Peyton's sudden appearance at the door.

"Where do you want your things?"

I look around at the barren room. "Oh, anywhere is fine."

He sets two suitcases in the corner. "Mom's finished with dinner, if you're ready to come down and eat?"

"Yes, alright."

Peyton escorts me downstairs where the family crowds around Irene's small dining table. We hold hands as Paloma spouts a childish grace, and then begin to eat the warm yet completely unoriginal lasagna Irene has prepared.

"So I was thinking," Brandon starts the dinner conversation, "before the kids' vacation ends, we should take a family trip up to the cabin. I could get the Ericksons to join us, and we could just get away for a little while."

"That would be wonderful dear," Irene fawns. "The kids would love that."

I find their planning boring, the cheap conversations of a suburban life. When Irene and Walter Junior were growing up, Walter and I firmly believed that children should be seen, not heard. We considered each meal as a lesson for the children to learn more about the world, and spent our time discussing art and literature at the dinner table. Now, Irene's children chatter uselessly about recess and texting, as their parents attempt to make plans over the noise. I concentrate on sifting through the salad to find lettuce that isn't completely wilted, making my own plans to ensure my last meal is more satisfying.

"Will Gramma come with us?" Paloma suddenly asks, drawing my attention back to the table.



“Well, of course your grandmother will join us. We’ll set her up nice and cozy in the cabin,” Irene says with a big smile.

I return my eyes to my plate, but I can hear sweet innocence in Paloma’s voice as she asks, “But what if Gramma is in heaven with Granpa by then?”

Everyone at the dinner table falls silent. Brandon looks horrified and I almost find his expression humorous, until I catch Irene’s glare.

“Mother, may I speak with you in the kitchen please?”

“Oo grandma’s in trouble,” Parker sing-songs to his brother.

I frown, but follow my daughter, in as dignified a manner as I can manage, into the messy kitchen. The door has barely closed behind us when my daughter turns on me.

“Mom, what were you thinking? Telling Paloma you’re going to die?”

“I really don’t see what the fuss is, dear. I simply hinted at the possibility of joining your father very soon, which you know will happen.”

“This is ridiculous. Dad is dead, Mom. He’s dead, and you’re alive. You have to move on. I know it’s hard, it’s almost unimaginable. But you have to accept that he’s gone and you’re not following him anytime soon.”

“I won’t. I refuse to,” I say, biting my lip to hold back any more childish protestations.

“You think I don’t understand how you feel? You didn’t just lose your husband, I lost my father. I feel the same pain. But now you want me to lose my mother? Can’t you see how selfish that is?”

“Darling, you have Brandon and the children. You don’t need your old, weak mother wandering the house like a ghost. What more could I add to your life? I did my

part. I raised my children. I watched one die and I watched you grow and flourish. But I have nothing left to give you. It's time for me to be done."

Irene stares at me for what feels like a lifetime. The grief is heavy in her eyes, and for the first time, I feel remorse. Perhaps I am being slightly selfish, but can't she see that she is as well? She can't see the bigger picture. Walter and I made so many plans together, we did everything together for so long, and then we were separated by the greatest adventure of all.

Irene finally sighs. "Please don't bring it up around the kids again."

I nod faintly as she turns and leaves me alone in the kitchen. I glance around at the dishes and remnants of dinner preparation and sigh. I was supposed to be done with all this: the diapers and dance recitals, the repetitive pieces of a family life. They hold no interest for me anymore. I look up at the ceiling.

"Walter? Oh Walter dear, do hurry up."

I wait for his presence to come to me, for a feeling of comfort, a sign, a glowing light perhaps. Maybe even a stab of pain, the rush of air from my lungs and the cessation of my heart.

But I sense nothing but the smell of lasagna and the dripping kitchen faucet. I take a deep breath, and the weight of loneliness fully hits me. I haven't cried since he left, fully expecting to be reunited soon, but the reality of carrying on without him settles in and tears suddenly arise in my eyes. I realize what I am: a widow. It seems a fate too terrible for words.

A knife sits on the counter, next to a cooling pie. Its blade is long and shined to perfection, a clean edge thinner than a piece of paper. I stare at it, imagining the blade

dancing across my thin skin, relieving me of this burden called life. With the whisper of a cut, I would sink to the ground peacefully, the draining of blood quiet and serene.

My mother was a religious woman. She believed in hell, the fiery gates of Lucifer meeting those who disobeyed. My mother was a believer, but I am not. For the majority of my life, I believed in one thing, and now he is gone. I take a step forward, ready to let the tragedy of my loneliness drift off my shoulders. I lift the knife in a wonderfully dramatic moment, anticipating my immediate reunion.

A burst of giggles emerges from the dining room and the knife falls from my hand, clattering on the ground. I stare at the door, listening to Peyton's voice rise above the others, cursing my shaky hands. I take a deep breath and tears spill over onto my cheeks. In the background, the boy's words become more coherent. He's explaining how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, describing each stage intently. I recall Walter's voice, older and gruffer, explaining the same process to me one afternoon in our garden. Pointing with childlike enthusiasm at the cocoon secured to a sunflower stem, he described metamorphosis with scientific precision. Walter always seemed to know a great deal more than I did, and he delighted in teaching me.

“And then the caterpillar, he's in this cocoon, but it's not called a cocoon it's called a...uh, it's called a...”

His childish stutters tug at something. They annoy and endear, the way only a child can. I try to ignore them, but find myself pushing open the door to the dining room and sticking my head around the corner.

“It's called a chrysalis.”