

The Bright World

APRIL DARCY

Megan's sister Jessy needed to fly in from California to say her goodbyes. The girls' mother, Rose, insisted they had plenty of time for all that, but Megan knew their mother was delusional by now. So when Rose finally called Jessy that Friday night, Megan stood in the hallway to eavesdrop.

"Oh, a week, maybe more," Rose said, her voice light. "Daddy's very strong, you know. You don't have to worry yet."

When Rose was in the shower an hour later, Megan called her big sister back. She told her there was no time left at all. That she was probably already too late.

Jessy cried on the California end of the line. Megan chewed the skin around her fingernails in their New Jersey kitchen. She didn't notice when they started to bleed. She was 18 and Jessy was 25. Megan wanted her sister to make it home in time to say goodbye. She wanted her father to die right that second if it would stop the suffering. She thought about dogs, about how people make sure their dogs die better than their humans. Wrapped up in warm blankets. Well fed. Pain free. She didn't know what to want anymore.

Jessy said she'd be home by morning.

The next day Megan sat at the kitchen table in the dawn light, a cup of hot coffee steadying her hands. Her mother emerged from her bedroom in last night's clothes, black slacks and a red blouse, with her maroon robe thrown on top. Mascara was smeared under her eyes.

"What are you doing up?" her mother said, startled.

Megan was already dressed for the day, in jeans and a black sweater, her dark hair knotted up at her neck.

"Dentist appointment," she said. "Remember? Then that festival. With David. I told you. But I'll stay until Jessy gets home."

Megan had gotten up before sunrise and found herself writing to David, again. Then she hit refresh on the AOL homescreen every time she walked by, toothbrush in hand, checking for an email back.

Her mother squinted at her. "Well," she said, turning to the medicine lined up on the kitchen counter. "Stop by the diner on the way home, for that soup your dad likes." She shook out dosages, organizing pills into small bright piles. "Oh, and the A&P for his ice pops. He needs them and we're almost out."

She sounded mechanical. Routine. Like her husband might sit up in bed any moment to ask for a sandwich, a smoke. Maybe for someone to toss him the remote so he could put on some golf. Megan forced herself to nod along, then followed her mother back toward her parents' bedroom.

Rose had always said fresh sheets were the most important thing for the sick. When Megan had a fever as a child, her mother forced her reluctant body out of bed to change the sheets every day. Megan stood in the corner, clammy and sweating, nearly in tears as she waited. But when her mother finished, Megan slipped right back in between sheets so crisp, so cold and so tight that her hot skin shivered in relief.

Her mother must have thought this would help her father too. And maybe it did, in the end. The final days of stomach cancer are nothing like a child's routine fever, but comfort is comfort. Her father had been lying in one position, curled up tight on his left side for a full day and night. His body was brittle, just yellow skin stretched over edges of bone. Her mother hadn't known, of course, that when she gently rolled him to his side, his skin, thin like tissue paper, would peel off on the old sheets. Megan thought nothing could penetrate the fog of his morphine, but this did. He rocked from side to side, more alert than he'd been in days, groaning as bloodstains formed under his hips.

Megan stood frozen at the threshold of their bedroom. She wanted to be useful. She imagined herself as tough and together, brave, industrious, but her feet wouldn't cross over. She offered to help in an unsteady voice, but her mother didn't respond. Maybe she didn't hear her. Megan watched in silence as her mother bustled around the bed, her face pinched tight and her arms full of bloodied fabric. Keeping busy was what her mother needed, Megan assured herself as she backed away. Her father groaned into his pillow. There was blood on that too.

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Megan sat in her bedroom a few minutes later, staring out the front windows and waiting for her sister. She'd been losing time lately, whole pockets of it up and disappearing. She'd be doing some routine thing, folding laundry or slipping on sneakers for a run, and time simply fell away. Ten minutes later the world blinked back into focus, her clothes half-folded, only one sock on, the maps and posters lining her bedroom walls re-forming their mountains and rivers.

The rental car pulled into the driveway and Megan shook herself awake. A blue convertible, of all things. She raced out in bare feet, already talking as her sister opened the car door.

"Imagine the worst thing a human body could look like," Megan said, hopping from foot to foot on cold asphalt. "As hard as you can. It's worse. Picture it before you go in. Don't let him see you react."

Jessy blanched. Megan didn't want to hurt her sister, not really, but she couldn't let some theatrical deathbed scene upset their father. If he even opened his eyes. She followed Jessy inside, then waited cross-legged on her bed in the thickening silence.

When Jessy finally appeared at Megan's bedroom door, her eyes reddened and wild, Megan picked up her car keys.

"I'm heading out," she said. She slipped on her worn leather boots and grabbed a bomber jacket. Clothes that felt indestructible.

"Like hell you are," Jessy said, stepping forward.

"You'll be fine," Megan said, slipping past her. "I'll be home tonight."

She closed the front door lightly so it wouldn't slam, then walked into the brisk morning. Her sister's pale face shone through the front windows as she pulled down the driveway, crunching over the last fall leaves. It was almost Thanksgiving, she realized.

Welcome home, Megan thought. She hadn't had a break in weeks.

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Megan went to the dentist, where she was admonished over all that tooth grinding she must be doing in her sleep. Then she headed down the shore to meet David. They'd met just three months ago in philosophy class, which she hated and he loved. But he'd already grown more important to her than her lifelong friends, than her family, than anything. The whole thing made her nervous if she thought about it, so she didn't.

She blasted the heat in the car as high as it would go and rolled down the windows to the cold November wind. She popped in a CD—The Eagles. *Hotel California*. Songs that made her think of other lands, of other lives. She headed south down the Garden State Parkway singing with abandon, whether she liked the songs or not, feeling gravity-less and wild. Perhaps frantic. She knew she should turn back but she had coverage at home for once, so she drove on, flying south, feeling lighter by the mile. She put on dark-red lipstick, her driving hand steady on the wheel as she glanced in the rearview, her hair whipping around her face.

David liked her in dark-red lipstick. He'd said it once, out loud, a blurted admission when they were drinking. They were having one of those nights where the lines of tight friendship felt blurry. He'd invited her over because they both loved thunderstorms. She had only ten minutes to get ready. She ran across campus from her freshman dorm to his senior one through a drizzle, umbrella-less, her hands shielding her curls. She stopped outside his building and leaned against a brick wall to catch her breath, so he wouldn't know her eagerness. Up in his room they drank rum and they talked and they stared for a second too long. She was dizzy with longing but kept it contained. Just friends, she reminded herself. He'd said something, almost off-handedly, about not looking for a relationship, but there was an edge to his voice, so she believed him. When the storm came they climbed onto his bed and knelt side-by-side at his window. He popped out the screen so they could hang out, hinged at the waist, and let the rain rush down over their faces and arms. Lightning forked over the parking lot like the bones of an electric umbrella, and they shrieked and clung to each other, their bodies lightly touching, hips and thighs and shoulders, as they knelt with their arms outstretched into the rain.

"You look sexy like that," he said, and she froze like a deer. He gestured toward her face. "Your hair is so dark, and you're so pale. All that red stands out, especially when your hair is in your face." He moved his hand like he was about to touch her hair, clinging wet against her cheek, but he stopped himself. Or maybe she'd imagined it. He hopped off the bed and busied himself with his stereo. She turned back to the rain and tried to steady her breath.

She'd tortured herself about the things she didn't do right then—lean in closer, give him a long meaningful stare, maybe push him right down onto the bed—ever since. She kept wearing the lipstick, hoping the moment would resuscitate itself.

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They met up at the Farmington rest stop at exit 99. He was standing with his back against his rusted blue Ford, looking lean in a college sweatshirt and holding two coffees from Wawa. She wanted to launch herself into his arms, to rest her head against his chest. The sensation of nearly cracking open had been coming in waves, a rising tidal pressure that wanted to bring her to her knees.

She stepped out of her car, said hey. He handed over a coffee and opened the passenger door. The car was already on, and warmed. She settled in for the ride, not caring where they went. He put on music for her, sad quiet songs he knew she loved (he thought they were cheesy but this was for her, this was all for Megan, and though she knew she was maybe milking his attention with the whole dying-parent thing, she didn't care, she needed him so badly). He drove the backroads to the beach, meandering, the way they both liked it. They passed the bungalows she liked best, tiny faded houses perched on stilts, shabby and bleak near the water's edge. The land was flat and scrubbed down here, with sand littering the box-shaped lawns filled with dying dune grass. She reclined her seat until she was lying down and curled her knees into her chest. The rumble of potholes and railroad tracks bumped along under the car, soothing her. The salt breeze leaked into the car. She felt like a kid, nodding off in her parents' backseat. All sleepiness and trust.

"Did she make it home?" he asked after a few miles of silence. He knew she needed to settle in before talking.

"Barely," she said.

She imagined her beautiful sister racing through her LA apartment, shoving boots and sweaters into expensive leather luggage, gifts from the producer

boyfriend Megan and her parents had never met. Shouting chaotic apologies as she raced out the door. When Megan was a kid and her sister visited from college, or from on tour with a show, or from LA, wherever she was living at the time, she always packed the same shampoo. When she left again, Megan watched the airport taxi round the curve of their street and then snuck into the guest room. She buried her face in her sister's pillow, searching for the familiar candy-flowered scent. At dinner, the table set for only three, Megan and her parents would endure a silent meal. Megan, too, had been born restless. Not theatrical like Jessie, but restless all the same. One night when she was eleven she announced her plan to live out west one day, like Jessie. Wyoming, maybe. Mountains and sky. Horses for sure, and cowboy boots.

The air went frosty after she'd spoken.

"So," her father said slowly, putting down his fork. "What I worked for my whole life isn't good enough for you either."

Megan couldn't have been more shocked if he'd slapped her. She sputtered out an apology, not at all sure what it was for. Her father stood and excused himself. Megan felt her mother's tension pulse across the table.

Megan learned to talk brightly at subsequent dinners, desperate to fill a void she hadn't caused, didn't understand. Never quite able to bear a graceful silence.

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When they stepped onto the boardwalk, Megan breathed in the sea air, the waves a deep November blue, and felt the tightness in her chest loosen.

David had stumbled across the Seabright Autumn Festival flier in the cafeteria last week. One pier reopening this Saturday only. The boardwalk crowds felt strange, in their sweaters instead of bikinis. Scarecrows held cotton candy in braced arms. Children skipped beside their parents with candied apples instead of ice cream cones. The Ferris wheel spun brightly in the distance.

David wandered around taking photos for an art class. Megan sat on a bale of hay in a quiet corner behind the log flume. A Springsteen band was starting up nearby and the crowds were gathering. Her father wasn't a Springsteen guy, but he'd stopped for shows like this anyway. Jessie was never interested in music, so he held Megan's hand in the front row. She swayed to the guitars, dazzled by the sound and stage lights. They'd get boardwalk cheesesteaks after, him popping Roloids like candy even then, no one thinking twice. Then he'd take her

for Italian ices. Cherry for her, orange for him. Orange ice was still his favorite today, even sick. Especially sick. She dropped hers once back then, and cried. He handed his right over, then took her to the games and let her win a goldfish with a Ping-Pong ball. They didn't say much. He wasn't the conversational type. But he looked at her like she was light dancing on water.

David strolled back. He plopped onto her hay bale, bent his elbows on his knees and flicked through the photos on his viewfinder. She loved his hands. How careful they were, how steady. An artist's hands. She was barely living in the dorms at this point, there was so much to do at home just an hour away, but on the rare afternoons she could escape, she snuck up to school and he'd visit. She'd lie on her never-used bed, staring at the ceiling and talking. She told him about the places she wanted to live someday, showed him her study-abroad brochures, rambled about the poetry and music she loved. She talked and she talked and he listened as if she were the most important thing in the world. When he left hours later, she'd find little hidden presents. Drawings tucked into the pages of her journal, stuffed inside her coffee mug. Her name sketched into a starscape, a constellation of letters. Lines of her favorite poems crawling out of a stormy surf. He wanted to be somewhere else too. Or at least someone else; she was sure of it. She kept each drawing in a shoebox under her bed. She wasn't sure where he went when he left her. She suspected Claire from the school choir. Tiny, beautiful. Voice like a songbird. She'd seen them talking a few weeks ago from across the cafeteria. There was something about the way his body bent over hers and Megan knew, all at once, how much she wasn't being given.

He put down his camera and looked at her.

Megan pulled a folded piece of paper out of her pocket.

"Here," she said, handing it over. "I emailed last night, late, but I knew you'd be rushing around. I printed it so you could read it now."

He unfolded the pages, his hands deliberate over the creases. He read while she sat alongside, listening to the waves with her eyes closed.

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Megan had a habit of narrating cancer to David. She emailed every morning, and again every night, while she was stuck at home, missing her own life. If she could swing a night away at the dorms, she wrote him from up there too, on her first ever laptop, tucked into her dorm-issued bed, her back to a sweating

cinderblock wall as music from other people's parties thundered down the corridor. The urge to write was new but David seemed to want to read, and once she started she couldn't stop. He never responded to her monologues directly. He sent lines of poetry in response, or song lyrics, words not his own but still beautiful. "But I'm always here reading," he said, and she believed him. There was something about the quality of his silence that made her able to say more things.

Jessy was home a month ago, she'd written this time. Her sister had tried to do the right things, Megan knew she was trying, but they always turned out wrong. Jessy had rented a car at the airport last time and stopped at the Woodbridge Center Mall on the way home to surprise their father with his favorite meal—a Nathan's hot dog and an orange soda.

On the couch a few hours later, Jessy was talking brightly to their father, who was too drugged to follow, when Megan walked into the room. The white sheets meant to cover his legs had fallen aside and one leg was exposed. Gangrene had set in and his leg was a deep charcoal up to the knee. His feet were the worst, black and rotting except where swollen skin had cracked open to wet tissue below, shiny red and pus-filled. Megan had gagged at first but had since learned to temper her responses. She and her mother never let him see any of it. They kept the wheelchair handy, his legs covered, his morphine dose as high as allowed. Higher lately. But because of Jessy, he stared at his foot, resting on the ottoman like an already dead thing, his face still and white. He took small bites of hot dog and chewed slowly. When Jessy wasn't looking, he spat them out into the napkin clutched at his side.

Megan stared at her sister. Just because his diseased stomach had been removed and he could technically eat for the first time in months didn't mean he wanted to. And Nathan's meant Coney Island where he'd grown up, not a fluorescent-lit shopping mall off of Route 1. It meant sea wind and The Cyclone and sweating cans of beer in hot sand. Megan and her father had never had this conversation but she knew this as well as she knew anything: that the joy in a boardwalk hot dog was over for him, and that he'd never say it out loud, and that there was accidental cruelty in her sister's kindness. Megan tucked the sheets back over his legs while Jessy rambled about her California life, her theater jobs, told a dumb story about palm trees in grocery store parking lots. Things they never discussed in this house; reminders that she had left them behind. Megan took the soiled napkin from his clutched fist and kissed the top of his head. His hair was still there, wispy and fine. There hadn't been time to bother with chemo. Not

indigestion after all, Dr. August had said to their mother, his hands flapping in useless apology. Megan felt sorry for him. Who would ever want to be a doctor?

"The little signs tell you where to go," their father said. Jessy looked up.

"What signs, Dad?"

"These," Megan said, picking up the family address book, which was lying on the coffee table by his feet. It had tiny flaps extended from the pages, one for each letter of the alphabet. "Maybe he's thinking about calling you."

"What?" Jessy said. "But I'm right here." Her eyes filled with useless tears. Megan wanted to slap her for crying. She stared out the window at the overgrown yard instead. She wondered at her human skin, that it could contain all this, hold everything in, all this blood and panic, these weird spasms of rage. She wondered if she might split down the seams soon too. What it might be like for a body to tear open, to splinter apart, all that muscle and tissue exposed to fresh oxygen. What it might feel like to be able to breathe.

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"Jesus," David said, tucking her pages into his shirt pocket. "These scenes. I don't understand how they're real. I mean, I know they are. But they sound like a movie, so totally fake."

"They are absolutely not real," Megan said. She plucked blades of hay out of the bale one by one and watched them blow away. "It's like those nightmares everyone has, about whatever, and you wake up and you're so relieved they're over, except in reverse. Every morning I wake up backward."

"So have you done it?" he said. "Said goodbye yet? I mean, is that a real thing?"

This is what she loved: he was unflinching. Not many had the fortitude for suffering, she was learning as her high school friends scattered into new lives. No, she had not said goodbye. She did practical, hands-off things. Got the morphine from the drug store, stomping her feet and throwing a pen that time the pharmacist refused to hand it over to her, a frantic teenager asking for the most powerful drug on earth at 3 a.m. while her father was at home groaning for relief. She bought groceries so her mother would remember to eat. They ate in the garage sitting on plastic bins that held their summer clothes, packed away for the long winter to come. They had to eat in the garage, her mother said, so he wouldn't smell the food he couldn't eat. They chewed in silence on grocery

store things like untoasted Pop-Tarts and refrigerator-section turkey sandwiches, the bread damp and cold. Chinese takeout on rainy days, the way they did when Megan was a kid, but straight from the cardboard containers with plastic forks. They listened to his breathing on a baby monitor. Sometimes he cried out or moaned, and her mother dropped her egg roll and ran. Megan stared at the dirt-crusted tools on her father's workbench. Half-smoked cigarettes propped next to the hedge clippers, empty Heineken bottles stacked near the lawn mower. The backyard grass was brown and overgrown. He could probably see it from his bed. It must be driving him crazy. Megan had never mown a lawn; she supposed she'd have to learn how now. She wondered if he was still breathing. If he died now, right this moment, would the body be cold by the time she got home? Would Jessie be the one holding his hand? She closed her eyes against the blowing sand. Her teeth hurt.

"You need to hit the road?" he said, squeezing her knee.

"In a minute," she said, slumping against his shoulder.

"Jesus, you're a mess," he said, pulling her to her feet. "Come on. Let's do one more thing."

He led her toward the Ferris wheel and she smiled. He lifted the safety bar so she could climb in first. She felt sleepy as they lifted into the bracing wind. He started telling stories. At the dorm party last night Tommy had gotten so drunk he'd opened his closet and pissed all over his own shoes. Someone had dropped a bottle of Aftershook and it shattered, blood red and cinnamon sticky, on the tiled bathroom floor. They ordered Chinese from Yi-Fu at 2 a.m. and when the delivery guy got off his golf cart to enter their dorm, Dan jumped down from his second-floor window, climbed into the driver's seat and hid the cart on the other side of campus. And the night before that, for no reason at all, the hockey team forked the main campus. "Forked?" she said. "Yup," he nodded. "Plastic forks from the caf, thousands of them. Stuck them in the green for no reason." This made her laugh, then cry a little. A thousand unnecessary forks shining in a collegiate sunrise. He didn't mention Claire, and Megan didn't ask. College was another world. Someone else's life.

There was an underwater quality to the moment. His every word and breath felt monumentally important as they spun in the late-autumn air, angling their bodies to better see water and sky. A storm was rolling in. If she were at college, she'd be at David's window, pushing out the screen. If she were a child, she'd be at home, her dad opening the door to the backyard. She and Jessie would stand

on the lawn, arms outstretched and heads tilted back, waiting for lightning. Their father taught his girls to count the beats between thunder and lightning. He taught them to stare directly at the storm, to not be afraid. Megan's mother would be inside making chicken cutlets, shaking her head while they rain-danced. When they came inside, their old beagle howled and licked the water off Megan's palms while Jessy raced for the first hot shower. Johnny would crack a Heineken, chuckling. Megan would stand dripping cold, her nose pressed to the glass, hanging onto the moment as long as she could. She always held on for too long.

When Megan realized she was crying, she groaned, raising the heel of her palms to her eyes.

"Stop it, you sad thing," David said. He pulled a bag of Skittles out of his pocket, shook some into his palm, and pelted her with them one by one. She looked at him in disbelief. "You're on a Ferris wheel," he said. A Skittle hit her cheek. "At the beach. You're with me. What else could a person possibly want?"

He tossed them at her nose, onto her feet.

"You freak!" she said, laughing and cowering in the corner. The breeze sprang up, blowing her hair. She was disoriented by sea wind and the avalanche of candy, by the warmth of his body, by being at the beach at all. She had stepped out of time, off the clock into something alternate, something better. She was eighteen again, wearing a boy's sweatshirt. Eating candy out of her lap, her shoes.

She didn't know that her suffering was almost over. She didn't know that when her father died, the shock of relief would be so big that she'd laugh, helplessly, his dead hand in her warm one, and that when Jessy and her mother stared at her in horror, shame would drive over her heart like a truck. But she'd survive it. Just like she would survive not having David, even though it didn't feel like it. But for now, to be with him in the salt wind made her want to sing. He didn't love her and she knew it, but she needed him, and that mattered too. So she hung on for dear life, the Ferris wheel's music-box tinkle buying her time.

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Back at the rest stop, she forced herself out of David's car and into her father's Oldsmobile, which was hers now. David waited until she was safely inside before he drove away. "It's too cold to walk you home," he said sometimes, when she'd been in his dorm drinking and talking until almost dawn. He handed her a T-shirt to sleep in. They crawled into his bed. They shared a pillow. He never

once touched her. Little sister, she figured. Dear friend. She watched him when he fell asleep, afraid if she breathed too loud, she'd shatter it. Then she curled up in a David-smelling universe and slept.

Megan rested her cheek on the steering wheel. She watched his car until it was just another speck on the parkway. He didn't look back and wave. She tried not to mind.

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On the way home, Megan stopped at the Edison Family Restaurant for the soup. She stood in front of the display case, confused by what, exactly, a dying man might want for dinner. She bought three quarts of beef barley and two of chicken noodle, just in case. The woman at the cash register was overweight, with smiling cheeks and a green sweater with a big turkey pinned on the left shoulder. She tossed extra muffins into the brown paper to-go bags. Megan again felt a near violent urge to throw herself into someone's arms. Anyone's. Instead she smiled a polite thank-you as she took her change. She walked back to the car with her arms full of freshly made soup, buffering her against the chilly air. She felt like the tide, rocking back and forth, day and night. Ceaseless.

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Back home all was quiet. Her mother was at the kitchen table on hold with the hospice center, holding an uneaten peanut butter sandwich Jessy must have made. Jessy was at their father's side, holding his hand and talking in low tones, the blond gleam of her hair shining through the dim. Megan peeled her mother a banana, which she ate mechanically. Megan took a bite of sandwich for her. Their mother hated peanut butter.

The night ticked slowly by. The girls took turns sitting with their father but after a time their mother wouldn't leave his side. Around midnight the girls sat together at the kitchen table for the first time in years. Jessy picked up a battered copy of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* Megan had left lying around. She'd been writing to David about it just last night, how much she loved that stupid book, how the lines of it stayed deep in her head like a song. Megan hated Jessy even touching it.

"I can't go back in there," Jessy finally said, tossing the book down so that the back cover flapped awkwardly. "Can't do another minute."

Megan stared at the bent cover.

Jessy rummaged around the back of a cabinet until she found an old bottle of wine from a long-ago Christmas party. She handed it to Megan with an eyebrow raised, and Megan accepted, but within a few sips she was covered in what must have been hives. “The fuck is this?” she said to Jessy, who shrugged, so they laughed, and then couldn’t stop laughing, Megan covered in splotches and Jessy pouring again anyway, a pair of near-hysterical sisters sharing their first-ever bottle of cheap merlot in the family kitchen.

They were still giggling as their mother came rushing into the kitchen. She saw their smiles and Megan felt caught, shamed for her small pleasure, as her mother opened the freezer and rooted around. Megan stood up, knocking over her glass as her mother spun to face her.

“Where are the ice pops? He wants one.”

A collapsing sensation. After his stomach had been removed—just to make him more comfortable now, the doctor said, let him eat a few last meals—his first request had been a fresh orange. He wept as he ate it in his ICU bed. Lately orange ice pops were the only food that didn’t make him vomit. Her father’s actual dying wish.

She forced it out.

“I forgot,” she said. “Between the dentist and David and the soup, I just forgot. I’m sorry, Mama. I’m so sorry. I’ll go right now.” Sobs wanted to rise but she pushed them back down.

The freezer was still open. The frosted air spilled out. Megan understood in that moment that a mother could hate her own daughter. Loathing was etched into every line of her face. Then she walked back to her husband with nothing in her hands.

Megan looked at Jessy helplessly.

“Who, my dear, is David?” Jessy said.

“Just a friend,” she said. Understanding as she said it that she was right.

Jessy shook her head, then flattened her palms to the table and pushed herself up. “I’ll go,” she said. “You sit. Drink some water.”

“No, no, it’s my job, I have to go—”

“Absolutely not,” Jessy said, grabbing the keys. “Let me do this one thing.” She leaned down and squeezed Megan’s shoulder. “When I get back, tell me about the guy.”

Megan pressed her cheek to the kitchen table, breathed in and out. Her chest turned to stone, then her stomach, her fingers. She wanted to go to the computer,

write it all down for David. Can you believe it? she'd say. The one thing he wanted. But she knew she couldn't make a story out of this one.

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Jessy ran a washcloth under the spigot, warm, and picked up Megan's face by the chin. She wiped her tears, dabbed calamine on the hives, tucked Megan's hair behind her ears. Megan hadn't been babied by her sister since she was a child. She let herself be comforted. The silence of the house rose, swallowed them both.

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He died the next day. It was noon on a Sunday. Megan had slept on the wooden hallway floor outside of his bedroom, afraid to go any closer or farther away. Jessy slept at the foot of her parents' bed like a stray dog wanting in. Her makeup was still on. She looked older to Megan in the morning light, more tired than she'd realized. As dawn came Megan crawled in and sat on the floor beside her father. She listened to his stilted breaths. She watched the hollow of his chest, tracked its slow rise and fall. She thought about singing for him but she couldn't do it.

An hour before he died she heard little girl-voices drifting in through the bedroom window. Megan rose and walked out the front door. The fresh air was a shock after the stale containment of a sick house. She stood in the center of her front yard, leaves underfoot and blue skies above, and watched Mrs. Graham, with blinding white teeth and a carefully pressed pantsuit, blowing bubbles with her two young daughters on the lawn across their driveway. Megan used to babysit the girls from time to time. On nights at their house Megan led the two little girls, each with a hand in hers, to their shared bedroom. She tucked them in under matching purple bedspreads. She plugged in their Minnie Mouse nightlight. Then she lay on the soft carpet of their attic bedroom between their twin beds and sang them to sleep. Soft songs. Lullabies.

"Sing the castle on a cloud song, Megan," the smaller girl always asked. She had cheeks so pink, and hair so black, and those eyes, a shocking cobalt blue, that she reminded Megan of a storybook girl, of fairy tales, of paintings. Megan sang for her, as many times as she asked her to. The girls fell asleep, such a small pair of sisters, and Megan sang for them anyway, quietly, faintly, feeling small and

alone on their bedroom floor, her parents fifty feet away across a green square of lawn, her own sister 3,000 miles beyond.

Mrs. Graham looked up. The smaller girl waved and an aching cold seeped into Megan's bones. She waved back, then hugged her arms to herself and jogged back inside.

It was quiet inside, the air overwarm, too still. He still breathed occasionally. Her mother was combing his hair with the brush he liked best, trying to give any sensation of pleasure. Jessie sat at his other side, smoothing the sheets and humming.

Megan stood at the door. The quiet of the house, broken only by his breaths, felt both holy and oppressive at the same time. *Holy and oppressive*, she thought. She wanted to write it down. She thought of her emails then, all of them, the raw, rambling words she'd been drowning David in. How could he bear her? Or what if her computer broke and she lost everything? She booted up the family computer in the guest bedroom. She pulled up that last email, those Brooklyn sentences playing like songs, and hit print. Then the prior one, and the one before that. Dozens. Then hundreds. She loathed her verbosity as she loaded more paper. The pages stacked so high they fell off the printer, drifting down like trash off the back of a garbage truck.

As she watched her words pile up on the floor, her mother leaned into the room.

"It's time," she said. Her eyes were flat and wild at the same time.

Megan forced herself to his bedside. The printer still churned in the next room.

"We're here, Johnny," her mother said. "Your girls are all here."

Megan grabbed her father's right hand, his guitar hand. It was dry and light, with bones like a baby bird. Across from her, Jessie held his left. His eyes opened for a last moment, still green and clear. He stared at nothing and breathed once, dank and hollow. *Dank and hollow*, Megan thought.

Then it was done.

The printer was still running, a mechanical word-hum a room away. Megan imagined the little girls next door at the Grahams' house, side by side on a yellow rug watching Mickey Mouse cartoons. They were eating vanilla ice cream out of pink plastic bowls. A mother stood in the doorway watching over her two daughters. Her hazel eyes were open wide.

*

Megan considered David as she stared out her bedroom window an hour later, her pages on her lap. The house was unnaturally still. Jessie was in the guest room whispering to her boyfriend on the phone. Her mother was in bed. Megan had begged her not to do it, not to lie on that sagging mattress wrecked with bloodstains.

"But I want to be close to him," her mother said.

Three women sat in three separate bedrooms in a house that felt vaulting and cold.

When the paramedics came to take the body away, Jessie stayed upstairs to keep an eye on things. Megan took her mother down to the basement, so she wouldn't have to see. She imagined Jessie as a bird above, light-footed on the hallway floors, barefoot and bossy with the medical workers, walking free. Megan held her mother's hand until he was gone.

*

Midnight after the funeral five days later, Megan spotted Jessie's suitcases stacked at her bedroom door. Louis Vuitton, packed and ready for her early morning flight. All that red, shining leather landed like a violation. Her little blue passport lying on top like a shield.

Megan had six hours left, give or take. She put on her boots and got in the car. The only direction was south. As far away as she could get. She resisted the urge to call David, to let him drive, to give herself over. She stopped at a Dunkin Donuts for a large coffee instead and drove cry-singing Counting Crows songs the first hour, Bruce the second. Atlantic City rose from the dark ocean like a hallucination, all flashing neon and red brake lights through her fogged windshield. She parked on a side street and headed to the boardwalk, walking the cliff edge between dark sea and casino lights. She rolled up her jeans and waded through the surf, her legs crusted with sand, her hair thick with salt. She snuck into Harrah's unquestioned and played the quarter slots, squinting as a middle-aged waitress in a short pleather skirt offered watery vodka sodas. Megan double-tipped and played until her last \$20 was gone. She drove home in wet jeans, barefoot and shivering, more awake than she'd been in months. The bright world fading in the rearview the whole way.

She pulled in before dawn, put the car in park, and opened the console to put away a CD. Her hand brushed against her father's tube of Roloids, the wrapper peeled back in a lazy ribbon. Her headlights warmed the house's darkened windows. She kept one hand on the wheel. With the other she worked loose a Rolaid. She rubbed her thumb along its grooves slowly, carefully. It dissolved like sand in her hand.

The things she wanted flooded her like weather. Her sister to stay and help carry this weight. Her mother to rise from the bloodied bed. David to be waiting, right here, now, she walking into his arms, spotlight by car headlights. Or she wanted to drive to the bottom of the world, where the road dead-ends into surf, and stand there and laugh. You don't always get what you want, she knew that now, but she wanted all of it anyway. Everything.

Her mother's bedroom light blinked on.

Maybe someday.

