

She had been placed in hospice in November. When he took her home they watched the dead leaves shudder on the trees and muddy slush spin off tire treads in the parking lot. He had parked the car close to the side of the building so they wouldn't have far to go. Her head lolled on her shoulder as she looked out the passenger seat window. Sorrow constricted around the man's body; a word uttered would tempt it into striking, and he was terrified of what would happen if it struck. He preferred to suffocate than to be poisoned by the grief. He wanted her to say something, wanted to hear her voice because he thought he might have already forgotten it. She was somewhere else, not in the seat beside him with the seatbelt pooling at her sides, but a world he was not privy to, a world only she was allowed to enter.

There is something far nobler in dying in your own home than in the county hospital. Death is a very private affair and he was glad she was coming home anyway. The hospital was far colder, the people too elastic. The nurses stretched themselves into sympathetic frowns to break unpleasant news and snapped back to their plastic cheerfulness in time for their lunch breaks. A rare blood-clotting disease, a baby born three months early, a diabetic losing circulation; the hospital saw tragedy and scheduled it, in an impartial manner, for treatment as soon as convenient and you'd simply have to be patient because they were doing the very best they could but there were just so *many*. The man could not stand the powdery smell of the industrial detergent, the soiled yellow walls and the curtains patterned with pallid daffodils. They reminded him of death and Easter. The hospital did not have windows in patients' rooms but it had a courtyard with fuschia pink Knock Out roses and white daylilies in neat little planting beds beside the waterlogged memorial benches. When she had been better she would sit there and read the books he brought her.

"What's the harm", she had said, in making one appointment, just to get the symptoms resolved.

By August it had metastasized to her pancreas.

He sat with her in waiting rooms next to expectant mothers and croup-stricken infants. He watched helplessly as she draped limply over the toilet, sick as a dog. With her back against the bathtub and the heel of her hand pressed against her forehead, she would reassure him that she was doing much better as he stood, anxious, by the doorframe. Consolatory cards constituted the majority of the mail he received, conservative little envelopes in shades of lilac and baby pink and mint green and other odious candy colors with prim lettering on the front. They piled up on her nightstand at the hospital during the weeks they kept her longer. He sat in the chair by her bed, looking down at her hands and the tendons rolling beneath the papery skin, the scrawny forearm by her side on the pilling blue hospital blanket. He looked at her and he felt the dread sink deep and heavy in the pit of his belly.

“Would you read them to me?”

Yes, he would.

She slept very easily and very tranquilly, which had always astonished him. He drifted off on occasion in the chair by her beside, but most of the time he found himself unable to sleep. The guilt gnawed at him. He felt guilty because she did not blame him and nobody else would. But if he did not blame himself, the illness would be meaningless, senseless, and she was more than a random lightning strike or some poor trick of fate. So he held the blame tightly like some priceless jewel and he did not tell anybody about it lest they try to take it from him. He let it swallow him up as he drank his stale coffee. He sat there and he listened to the steady hum of the old radiator and he watched her sleep.

Despair twisted its spindly talons into him like he was carrion. He prided himself on his composure and calmness, was certain he could perhaps even stay steady in a robbery or disarm

an explosive without an excess of sweat, but a simple, natural thing was beginning to break him. He needed to get control over it. He needed to swallow it down. It did not go away. It stuck there instead, a lump in his throat that bubbled up into welling tears. When he made arrangements for her burial, he could barely whisper. The funeral director bent his head in sympathy. His sun freckled scalp, from some vacation in Mexico where the sun was brighter and everyone was alive and tanned and hale, where he pretended to be just like the rest of them and the people were too polite to say otherwise. Patches of rosacea flushed over the lower third of his sagging face. When he moved to speak, his jowls shook.

“What flowers did she like?”

He did not remember.

He did not remember what her favorite flowers were, and he could not call her to ask. He had let himself forget, and now he was paying for it. Daisies or daffodils or dahlias, he did not know. The months had bled away, put him into a dreamlike hypnosis that he had gratefully and willingly slipped into. It was easier, less painful to sleep through upset than it was to stay awake and feel the full force of it. He would have done anything to escape that dreamy otherworld he'd gone to in her last months. But he couldn't fight it. It was an overpowering wave, pulling him adrift. He thought about when they had taken a road trip out West, all the way to California, and the sun spilling golden warmth across the dashboard while she dozed in the passenger seat. They stopped at some faded hotel a half-mile off the interstate and he left her there to sleep for the afternoon while he went out to see the redwoods. He walked down the nature trails until the moon hung limply in the sky and his ankles were beginning to blister. The trees that rose up behind him would live five lifetimes after him. He couldn't think too much about that or he began to feel strangely. In his rearview mirror the trees looked like an impenetrable wall, already

closing themselves off to him. When he got back the room was dark and she was sitting on the balcony looking out at the glow of traffic below. She heard his quiet shuffle on the carpet but she didn't look at him so he sat in the patio chair next to her and watched her as she stared over the railing. The orange streetlights cast shadows in the hollows of her eyes. He thought about the redwoods.

*Am I still dreaming?*

He didn't answer.

He thought about that trip with greater frequency after she had gone. She was there in a neverending sleep and he was as good as asleep. He hated the feeling of being alive, hungry and angry and sick with nervousness, while his eyelids grew heavier and his body was a dead weight he dragged around like a ball and chain. She was in a neverending sleep and he was there with blistering ankles and redwoods rising all around him. He didn't know if he was dreaming or alive. He didn't know if he had ever left California.

Memories were a dull ache, not the violent pain of the present. He lived in the memories the way she lived in her dream world. He remembered when she was four or five, her stumbling run over the clover fields, uprooted daisies crushed in her pudgy fist. He remembered her downy hair and her clumsy walk in too-big shoes with untied laces; the sibilant *s*'s she would make the year she had lost her two front teeth. He remembered staying up with her when she came down with a one hundred-and-three degree fever, cough syrup in one hand and landline in the other, phoning her pediatrician for the fourth time that night. He remembered the paper-mache volcano that was still sitting on a shelf in her room; boxed mac-and-cheese and microwave dinners; birthday parties and recitals and musicals and dances; her luminous face as she bowed jubilantly

before every audience, looking through the blinding limelight to where he sat, three rows from the back. He remembered thinking then that reminiscing was already impossible to bear.

When she went to college he called her every day from Boston. She always picked up. They talked until she ran out of quarters. He heard her becoming a different person each time they called; she was losing what she had left home with. Each time he dialed her number he began to feel sick, certain the call would be answered by a stranger who had stolen his daughter's voice. He wanted to bring her back so she would stay the way she was when she had first gone. Yet being a stranger is better than not being there at all. But he could not say this, could not dare to think it, because there are some things that you can't speak about. He knew if he thought she wasn't there, then she'd never come back. He was simply waiting for her, the way she waited for his call. She would come back.

When something goes missing, it isn't replaced, it is swallowed. It is gone, and there's a space shaped just like what has been taken. It is sickening that the world doesn't grind to a halt when they go, because that seems to indicate that whoever was lost was expendable: a perhaps tragic figure, but not truly as indispensable as they proved to be in some peoples' lives. The earth continued to spin, and footsteps of strangers smoothed over the wrinkle in the fabric of time that she left when she was taken. She was gone, and the world was not mourning her, not falling apart as he was. He couldn't understand it. A light brighter than the sun had at once evaporated and yet everyone still rose in the morning and went to bed at night unaware of the dark. He felt the pressure of the eyes that had once looked at him with pity and now searched his face reproachfully. Certainly it was a tragedy, but he wasn't forgetting her on schedule. He was taking too long. But a year had no meaning to him. It was Plato's cave: since her passing he had lived in a fugue state, not daring to look at anything else but the empty space she had left behind. He did

not remember what a month was because it didn't matter. He was too afraid to turn away from the wall, too afraid to turn toward a different light.

He was certain he would hear her from anywhere in the world if she whispered, all the way from Boston, and he would be ready when she did. He kept everything in order for when she came back. He never went in her room once after she had gone, not even to dust. He kept her coat in the closet and her shoes by the door. She had asked for a book from the library before she had gone. When he went back to pay the fine they let him keep it and he put it by her place at the dining table so she could finish it at dinner. Eventually it became routine, and the memory associated with the action lost its luster. The routine was becoming his routine, no longer hers, but he kept it anyway. It was once a part of her, and no one else would know if he did not keep it just the way it was. We pick up the pieces others leave behind, not out of greed, but love.

As he sat at the table across from the empty seat and the empty plate and the unopened book he thought about what he would say when she came back. He could tell her how much he loved her and missed her over and over again and he knew it would not have had any more value than his having never said it at all. But if she asked him to read to her, he would stay up every night until his eyes became too heavy with sleep and his mouth too dry to whisper. He would wait in any waiting room and stand in the doorframe while she was vomiting a hundred times over if there was the slightest chance at another outcome. He would have done it all over again even if there was no possibility of saving her. He would have asked her everything, written it down all over the walls when he ran out of paper, used up the ink in every pen he could find, just to make sure he didn't let some crucial detail of her life disappear into oblivion out of negligence. The fog that he had been fighting for months on end would dissipate the moment she

stepped through the door. He would watch the redwoods fade behind him. He would watch her finish the book.

It was this, he thought. He did not know what her favorite flowers were. But she would tell him when she came back. And when she did tell him, he would at long last know whether he was dreaming.