

Thaw

I find Evelyn on the living room carpet with the shades drawn, fooling with our old movie projector. She's in the lime green sweatsuit and running sneakers again. The baggy silhouette only hints at her actual shape, making her recent weight loss less noticeable.

"All through?" she asks, though I have clearly come from the back door and not Eric's room, which I have promised to clear out. Instead, I drive to the reservoir to watch the ice floes sweating in the March sun. Last October, my son jumped in the reservoir on a dare. They never found his body. Visibility is poor, the diver said, as he handed me Eric's wallet. We'll try again in the spring.

"I made a start," I lie.

Ev believes in a kind of energetic, cathartic mourning that I cannot stomach. True to her nurses' training, she is systematically working her way through her stages of grief, hiking Mt. Monadnock, holding meditation nights, and practicing yoga. On the night of the accident, she was working in the emergency room, waiting for a son who never came.

"Don't make me go in there." She shivers at the reappearance of this mother's threat.

Don't make *me* go in there, I think. But someone must.

"Take a look." Ev plugs in the projector and people run across a paper screen that rolls down from the ceiling. And there he is again: Eric.

We're in the backyard in our bathing suits, running through the sprinkler. Eric, no more than a peanut, runs in circles over the oscillating spray, his arms splayed out behind him. Ev looks on, trim and lovely, radiating health. Her curls, loose and brown, twist in the

wind. Then Eric trips on the hose and falls on the grass. His face explodes in tears as he lies on his belly, unsure how he got there. Within seconds, Ev is beside him, cooing in his ear. With a stroke of her thumb, she wipes the tears from his eyes. Then they flip over and lie there, sunning themselves on the grass, smiling. There's a brief shot of my feet and the film runs out, flapping in the projector like a trapped bird.

"I'm trying to pick one out for my Intensive Loss Retreat." She reaches for another reel, feeding the film's tail through the looping wheels. "They say to bring something bittersweet."

Isn't everything now?

I walk over and run my hand through her hair; the curls short now and ringed with silver. But she is the same girl, I think: game and quick to smile.

Then she flinches at my touch. I turn away.

"You could come with me." She calls after.

Ev loves her work in the trauma unit; the satisfaction that comes from trying to help people. But sometimes she pushes too hard.

"You go ahead," I stuff my hands in my pockets.

"You're never going to say yes to anything I ask, are you?"

"I'm going back upstairs."

Ev's disdain is starting to rankle. So, this time, I do it. I go upstairs and open the door.

To be in Eric's room again is intoxicating. It's a mess, as usual—mish-mosh pit of a room, clothes rioting around me like high schoolers hyped up on caffeine and clove cigarettes,

school books tossed on his desk in a heap, CDs scattered naked on the floor like loose change.

I hit the play button on his stereo; there is a long moment before the high-pitched voice of a French woman fills the room. He was doing homework. "Ou est le cafe s'il vous plait?" "Where is the cafe?" "Le soleil est dans le ciel." "The sun is in the sky." Her French voice is about two octaves higher than her English voice. I let the tape play and find myself chanting the foreign words. *Ou est le bibliotheque? Qu'est que c'est qu'un pamplemousse?* Their strangeness fits this alien project.

Everywhere, there are tennis balls. Once upon a time they were yellow but some marketing genius—probably in California where the sun is brighter, or at least out more often—decided that we need bright pink and orange ones too. I reach for his tennis racquet and swing it over the floor like a wand that will make the clothes rise and assemble themselves into Eric. But he is nowhere; he has not died so much as disappeared. I feel only the bleak consolation of the racquet in my hand.

But when I slide the case back on, a picture falls out: Eric courtside with a blond girl in a white tennis skirt, her arm draped around his shoulder like a towel. So comfortable, like it belongs there. Eric slouches to accommodate her embrace, folding his lanky frame at the knees and letting his hair fall farther into his eyes. All I can see is his wide, easy grin, the joyful shape of his face.

Being a guidance counselor at the high school has its privileges, not the least of which is the ability to find out what your teenage son is doing when he thinks you're not looking. Oh sure, he knew I was there; we drove in together every day. He'd slip away when we reached the parking lot, hoping to conceal what everyone already knew—namely, that

he was mine—but we’d meet again in the halls, nodding to each other like diplomats from unfriendly countries. Whether he liked it or not my job gave me access to his life; I wasn’t as easily shut out as other dads. Or so I thought. Among other things, I’d missed this big moment, this prime turf for father-son bonding: the first girlfriend.

As my son has before me, I sit on the edge of his bed, holding the girl’s picture by its curled edges. She’d never set foot in my office, but I’d seen her in the halls: Lacey Sadowsky, a sophomore. The Blackstone Regional girls travel in packs based on their perceived beauty, athleticism, and intelligence that also determine the boys they hang out with; Lacey falls right into Eric’s demographic. One thing is clear: I have to meet her.

After the accident, I returned to school for almost a week. Ordinarily I would have been in charge of implementing the school’s grief management plan. Instead the faculty thoughtfully routed their unruly charges to Melinda Federico, a rosy-cheeked Latina with too-earnest enthusiasm of a recent college grad. With my waiting room empty, I had plenty of time to begin different sort of grief management. One by one, I called the junior class into my office and pumped them for information about that night at the reservoir.

Eric was with four other boys, friends I didn’t even know he had. The guys from woodshop who’re always fooling with the jigsaw, rumpled and covered in sawdust but imposing in a pack because of their height and their willingness to egg each other on as if they have nothing to lose. And, the truth is — I know because I’d counseled each of them on separate occasions — they don’t. No parent waits at home wondering where they are. All they have is their fun. They’re always getting each other to do stupid things. Throwing

shopping carts off bridges. Lighting trashcans on fire. That night, they were all sitting on the hood of a car. Drunk, as usual. They dared Eric to jump from the rocky ledge high above them, a sort of initiation rite. He climbed; he stripped; he jumped into the freezing water. The other boys sat watched from below, whopping and clapping, as if he were the Space Shuttle launching. They didn't notice that anything was wrong until five minutes later, when Eric still hadn't come out.

It wasn't long before Melissa noticed the stream of students flowing in and out of my office. Principal Frank Fitzsimmons offered me a mandatory leave of absence for the rest of the school year. Despite my exile, I manage to locate a tone of teacherly authority when I dial the phone and ask for Lacey.

"She's out..." Her mother says, then pauses. "Who is this?"

"Richard Dunbar. I understand Lacey was a friend of my son, Eric." I let the name hang in the air for a moment.

I hear a quick gasp, but she says nothing.

"I was hoping I could talk to her."

"Of course, of course. She's playing tennis at the Y with her father now, but she'll be home later this afternoon."

"Would you mind if I came over?"

"Around four? We live right near the university. Past the stadium, fifth house on the left." She pauses. Her voice turns high and quiet. "It's just so awful."

"I know. See you then." I fake the bucked-up cheer people expect of me now — no one wants to bear witness to my grief — and hang up the phone. Then I pull Eric's wallet from my front pocket, slide Lacey's picture inside, and tuck it back next to mine, the weight

of the two wallets pulling the leg of my pants down.

At four o'clock, I make my way to the back door, past Ev, who is still surrounded by stacks of reels in the living room. She sighs and tosses her hair for my benefit.

"Going there every day can't be helping."

She thinks I am going, again, to the reservoir.

I start to explain where I'm really going, then stop. Does it matter? She'd think this trip was more of my useless wallowing. I am tired of her righteousness.

"Like that movie will?"

Ev slams down the reel and it clatters across the floor. "How can you keep pretending? He won't be back. He's not coming back." She is breathing so deeply she is almost panting.

"We need to talk about this." Ev stares up at me, her face almost hopeful. She's been planning for this moment, I can tell.

"You want me to talk, but you don't like what I have to say."

"What do you have to say?" She stares at me from the floor, cross-legged, straight-backed, clear-eyed. She's braver than I expected, but I'm done pretending my grief is any less correct than hers.

"He is coming back," I say, louder now.

Her face twists with disbelief. "But he's gone. "

"Gone? Gone where? Do you know where he is?" My voice is rising. Yelling feels good.

"He's dead," she whispers. It's more of a moan than a sentence. She pauses, does her deep breathing again, and continues, clear-voiced. "You have to accept it. "

"I don't have to accept anything."

My voice rings through the empty house.

Ev shakes her head.

I let screen door slam behind me.

I drive too fast and arrive well before I'm due, so I sit in the car and wait. The Sadowsky home sits on hill overlooking the smoke-stacked skyline of our once industrial city. Stately elm and oak throw up a mosaic of green leaves that offers intermittent glimpses of the huddled masses below. This is a great neighborhood. Old in a fashionable way, unlike ours. The house itself is looking a little rundown, but that could just be the toys littering the muddy front yard. The sunlight is bright and pleasantly warm after weeks of fickle Massachusetts weather. I close my eyes and let it warm my face. I will not let Ev ruin my discovery.

At four on the dot, I head for the door. The doorbell tolls and a blond boy pulls open the coffered front door. He is licking something brown—most likely chocolate, perhaps dirt—from his palms. He finishes one and goes over the other until there isn't a spot left. Then he smears them on his shorts and says, "Who are you?"

"Is your mom home?" My voice is too loud. I'm all keyed up and talking too fast.

I pull a handkerchief from my pocket and try to clean his hands but he squirms out of reach. He looks at me, disappointed, makes a little grunt as if he has something stuck in his nose, and then runs off toward a swing set I can see out the back window.

I ring the bell again and wait. I am about to step through the door when another, nearly identical boy appears propelling a small Matchbox car through the air. "Remington

to mission control. I've lost contact with Jackson. The Tentrolians have him."

"Is your mom home?" I ask as he jets off into the living room. And then she appears.

"How long have you been here?" Mrs. Sadowsky stands in the doorway with a baby in a blue jumper slung over her arm. She's about Ev's age, but there is a softness to her features, a rumped as-is quality that makes her seem younger. She's wearing overalls and a black t-shirt, her dirty blonde hair pulled back in one of those clips that leave tendrils loose against her neck. "Come in! You should just come in."

"Richard Dunbar." I hold out my hand and she waves it away, hitching up the baby and glancing at her watch.

"Lost track of time! Lacey's still not back yet. Come. We'll have coffee."

I follow Mrs. S through cozy rooms littered with picture books and toys and sippy cups, the smell of apple juice and talcum powder in the air. The kitchen is a wreck, with crusted cereal bowls, half-full coffee cups, and wadded paper towels still sitting atop old spills. Through glass doors, I can see the two boys kneeling side by side in the backyard sandbox, driving bulldozers through the mud.

"I know it's not exactly warm out, but they've been begging me all morning."

Mrs. S. pulls a bottle from the fridge behind me and drops it into a pot of water heating on the stove. "You'll have to forgive me. Everything seems to fall apart on Saturdays. No school, no playgroup, no sports. Nada. They're all mine." She rolls her eyes crazily in their sockets.

"Sit," I say. Despite the mess, I feel at right home. "Let me get it."

She jumps at my offer and drops into a kitchen chair. A strap falls from her shoulder, but she lets it sag while she rearranges the baby's jumper so his diaper's not showing.

I pull the bottle from its hot bath and hand it to her. Then I pour myself coffee and sit. The drink's warmth spreads down my throat and through my body. My pulse edges back toward normal. "How many Sadowskys are there? All told?"

"Six is the grand total. The three boys, Lacey, my husband Nick, and me. Six," she repeats as if she can't believe it. The baby has grabbed hold of the bottle, sucking happily and lolling backward in his mother's arms. "I thought we'd stop with Lacey. I never..."

She cuts herself short and looks up at me for the first time, remembering that I did stop at Eric, and he stopped on me.

"I found Lacey's picture in his racquet bag." I hate to betray my ignorance, but I feel that Mrs. S knows what it is to try and fail. "Were they close?"

"Some days they'd meet up after practice and come back here for TV and snacks," she said. "She went to the memorial service, with the rest of the girls' team."

I sip my coffee and nod as if I remember but I don't.

"Don't feel bad. I only found out because I walked in on them making out in the den. Secrets are a teenage form of independence."

"But I'm supposed to be the expert." I had wanted to be a cool Dad, one Eric could come to with problems before they became trouble. But I was just another oblivious father and now a terrible husband too. I can see Ev's face as I walked out the door: unsurprised. She's already given up on me.

"Lacey eats, drinks, and sleeps tennis," says Mrs. S. The baby has raised his feet to his hands, curling into a ball around the bottle. He rests safely in the crook of her arm. "I don't play so I'm lucky she's still talking to me. Do you play?"

"I taught Eric," I say but that's as far as I go. I can't talk about our Saturdays on the

tennis court as if they are nothing.

“Go on.” Mrs. S looks up at me with sympathetic eyes, pouched and circled from lack of sleep.

“If Lacey is on the team, she must be good.”

“She has to improve her backhand if she wants to play in college,” she says. “My husband’s out making sure of it right now.”

Another afternoon on the tennis court. The envy I feel for Mr. S is boundless. I want to cry out that I have done the same. I want lay claim to all that I have lost. Instead I say, “Eric has this crazy topspin. The ball turns right into your body.” I mime his swing through the empty air. “He’s a lefty.”

And with these words, Eric finally returns to me: broad shoulders filling out his Rancid t-shirt; pimply forehead hidden beneath too-long bangs; the same lazy smile he’d had in the film that morning. He cranks a forehand past my flailing volley as the ball — a good old-fashioned yellow one — disappears before me in the twilight. For the first time, I think I understand what Ev is doing. She is not trying to get over Eric; she is trying to get closer to him. I am the one performing the loss retreat, running away from my son so I don’t have to admit he is gone.

Mrs. S must see the shock on my face because she reaches out with her free hand and strokes my arm. She smiles sadly, her chin collapsed into her neck from holding her sleeping son. She kisses the top of his head as she comforts me. I do not envy her this gesture; I love her for its simple honesty. She doesn’t hide her love for her son in the face of my crushing loss. She is brave enough to show it.

“You wait and see,” she says. “They’ll find him. After the thaw.”

Outside the Tarzan yells of the two boys pierce the air. We turn to watch them launch themselves from the top of the swing set into the sandbox below. Their faces light up as they land on all fours and scramble up to try again. I cringe at their daring and wonder if Mrs. S ever thinks about how dangerous children are, how willing they are to risk everything for a single thrill.

“I should go,” I say.

“But Lacey will be hear any minute.” Mrs. S starts to get up, but she can't. Her son has fallen asleep on her chest.

“Don't.” I put my hand on her shoulder and squeeze. “He looks so peaceful.”

Mrs. S doesn't argue with me. “Come again,” she says. She relaxes back into her chair; the baby murmurs with satisfaction. “I could use the conversation.”

“Maybe someday,” I reply.

I slip out the back door, passing the swing set and the two boys, who don't stop their game for me. They keep climbing, launching themselves toward the muddy ground. They cry out with glee at their own might and daring. I stand for a moment and inhale the musty smell of soaked earth, the freshness of the cool air.

When I get home, Ev is on the living room floor doing yoga to an instructional video. She stands with one bent leg on the thigh of the other, her hands pressed in prayer over her heart. She wears only leggings and a sports bra and even these sag from her bony frame. I was wrong; she is nothing like young wife and mother in our home movies. I want to pull her into my arms, but it is not that simple. Instead I kick off my shoes and join her.

“You're doing it with me?” Ev looks over at me, surprised.

"I'm trying."

On the television, a lithe, serene blond frolics by the sea. We raise our arms when she does; we bend over backwards for her. At the end we stretch out in what she calls corpse pose. Lying beside Ev, I close my eyes and think of Eric, adrift in an unknown blackness. The credits roll over dreamy flutes. I turn my head to Ev, who has opened her eyes, soft and gray, just like Eric's.

"There is no Intensive Loss Retreat." Ev lets her hands drop to her side. "I just wanted to watch the movies."

"I know." I take Eric's wallet from my back pocket and toss it on the floor between us. "You didn't tell me about Lacey."

"I wanted him to tell you," Ev rolls onto her side and reaches for me. She puts her hand on my arm and I grab her wrist, holding it there.

"He never did," I shake my head. I look down at the brown leather, soaked to black and scored by jagged scratches. I see it finally for what it really is: proof that I lost him long before he was gone.

"If they had brought him to me, I could have fixed him."

"I will bring him to you," I say, my voice shaking. "We will fix him." On this, we can agree.

Ev rolls toward me and I grab her. Though her body feels fragile in my arms, her mouth tastes sweet and familiar. We lie together on the floor with Eric's wallet pressed between us. It is March, almost spring, and we have begun to thaw.