

Cadie

The white, square tiles lined with gray-blue plaster covered the floor and walls of the All-Sups women's restroom in Menard, Texas. Cadie, sitting opposite the toilet with her back against the wall, was surprised to find the tiles clean and warm. Cadie imagined the countless times the wrinkly woman with deep-set eyes working the register out front must have wiped the tiles, scrubbing at the stains and grime with arthritic elbow grease.

Cadie studied her black stilettos. The expensive heels had been a gift from Hayden, but she was so exhausted, she couldn't remember when he had given them to her. While the shoes mocked her forgetfulness, Cadie's blood-red toenails peeked through. Her toes looked inflamed, puffy, strangled. She wore a form-fitting black dress to match that stopped above her knees. The intricate lace clung to the curves of her toned body until it choked her at the neck. Cadie had bought the dress to wear for their two-year anniversary when Hayden made a thoughtful reservation at her favorite fusion restaurant. He had surprised her beforehand, presenting the pricey shoes to her as the perfect complement to her new dress.

Hayden was constantly spoiling Cadie, lavishing her with gifts that usually made her feel more guilty than loved. What had she done in her life to deserve him? *Nothing* is what her mother would have said.

She couldn't look at the black and white photograph in her shaking hands anymore, so she carefully folded the small square photo into fourths, following the worn creases faithfully. She glanced at the date on the back and shuddered.

Had it only been a week ago she sat in her corner office in Austin and dialed the number?

Cadie pulled herself up and stared into the mirror, letting her bloodshot eyes take in the spectacle. Her bleached blonde locks appeared almost white under the harsh, artificial lighting of

the restroom. The careful up-do she had accomplished before leaving her loft this morning had fallen into disarray. Cadie's frizzy hair had random strands falling around her angular face as if a flock of birds had plucked and nestled into her bun to make a nest.

The effect softened the harshness of her high cheekbones, but she didn't look beautiful. Her red Revlon Immortal lipstick made her look as if she had coughed up blood rather than glowing with the promise of eternity. Her cloudy blue eyes reminded her of a pond covered with morning fog, but there was no tranquility there—just stillness. Dark circles enshrouded her eyes like a forest.

When Cadie arrived at the funeral, she had to park in the grass along with a dozen or so other vehicles. The pathetic gravel parking lot could only handle a few four-door trucks or ten normal cars. The trucks had arrived first and claimed the limited space unapologetically. As she wobbled in her heels through the brittle December grass towards the tent, she heard the instrumental music begin, sounding too cheerful to her—offensive. The piano's song performed by a tiny girl in a frilly black dress drifted past her on the heavy wind, carried it across the cotton fields. A hawk's shadow moved to it.

The golden fields dotted sparsely with white fluff balls respected the rusted wrought-iron boundary of the old Gishop family cemetery. Hayden would have shaken his head and said, "It's a bad time to be a cotton farmer." The neat rows stretched as far as the horizon until the blue and dark gold blurred together like two different skies reflecting each other. It felt like the end of a movie right before the credits rolled or a sad painting: so final and finished. Cadie knew better.

Finding most of the seats filled underneath the temporary pavilion, Cadie stood in the back unnoticed. She recognized few and knew no one. She had forbidden their *real* friends and

coworkers at the firm from making the drive. Cadie instead had hosted an intimate memorial dinner with them in Austin before making the God-forsaken drive to a God-forsaken place like this. She had chosen to have nothing to do with *this* funeral, partly because she couldn't get out of bed, eat, drink, or speak after hearing the news and partly because she hated that anyone would want to be buried here of all places. She would have cremated her husband's body and sprinkled the ashes across Lake Austin, standing on the lookout where Hayden had proposed to her after gently tucking wildflowers in her hair.

Regardless, Cadie regretted allowing Darlene to arrange everything. The bulletin had an elaborate angel wing watermark and big, loopy gold cursive. Was this a funeral for the man she loved or a tasteless birth announcement? The tactless service itself followed suit with the bulletin's and music's inappropriate cheer. Hayden's old high school buddies to Sunday school teachers stood up, told stories that moved Cadie to quiet, continuous tears. She didn't even know this Hayden they spoke about. The man they knew seemed so strange to her: stealing beer from the local liquor store on a dare, jumping in the public pool buck-naked when he was in elementary school. They didn't know the special man who died; but that was fine, she did.

Standing alone, Cadie looked to her left and saw Hayden beside her. He said in his classic, jaunty way, "Cadie Ann, why are you crying? It's just plain wasteful to spend this much time remembering the dead when you've still got breath in your lungs. You've got the sweetest heart beating in your chest. You're not dead yet, beautiful, so let's go and do something!" And that "something" would be running in Zilkner Park, or touring her favorite museum he had taken her to countless times, or going mudding in his Ram truck on his friend's acreage in Bee Cave. Cadie never said no. Even if it wasn't always her idea of fun, she never wanted to miss one of his adventures. She never wanted to miss that lop-sided grin of his.

Cadie left the cemetery, driving her silver SUV down long stretches of dry, dusty roads, endless and repetitive. The details of the fateful night just a few days ago hovered over her like the hawk's shadow. As horrific as this whole day had been, it was like trying to remember a story someone told her secondhand. She had lost the memory somehow. It wasn't hers anymore; it was no longer a memory of a real thing.

Her eyes took in the ever-expanding dullness of the landscape. It was hard to tell the difference between where the dirt roads began and the rest of the soil took over. Hayden had told her about the barren dryness of West Texas, but he talked of it endearingly, as if there were something redeeming about miles and miles of flat, bone-dry dirt from which grew ugly, skeletal bushes shaking in the constant wind. Cadie saw nothing of value. She even found herself growing angry and upset with Hayden, wanting to give him another one of her lectures about his romanticized view of the world.

"How the hell did you grow up here, Hayden? It's so ugly!" she snapped at the empty passenger seat. There was no reply.

"I would have never raised our kids here! Why did you love this place so goddamn much, huh? You know I would've never—" Her voice caught in her throat, out came sobs.

"Hayden...oh God, how am I going to do this."

A white, two-story colonial house with a wrap-around porch stood stoically at the end of a private dirt road lined with tall, dark trees planted as windbreakers for the property. The sky looked to extend forever above the house like a floating bed sheet. The fiery sun set, staining the sheet with blood. The vividness of the red disturbed Cadie, but to her surprise, the sight of the

old, weathered house brought her the first positive sensation she'd felt since that dreadful night. Hayden's parents' house reminded her of an old woman, proud and regal, who had endured many days of harsh weather and trying times. In spite of everything, Cadie felt a strange sense of calm come over her.

She carefully fixed her hair using the small rearview mirror, a delaying tactic that restored some sense of courage for the task ahead. Her long, loose curls now fell down her back in cascading waves. She used bobby pins to pin some of her hair back and away from her face. She looked striking, but again, not *exactly* beautiful—more like a wax mannequin.

Getting out of her SUV, Cadie shivered as icy gusts whipped at her face and now-ruined hair. Any attempt at order was quickly dismantled out here in the wild west. She slipped on her jacket, then slid off her heels and replaced them with black patent flats she had stowed away in her backseat, thinking them *slightly* more appropriate for the country. As she reached for her overnight bag, Cadie heard a screen door slam shut.

“Here it comes,” Cadie whispered.

“Thank goodness you made it, hun! Me and Charles were worried sick!” said an overweight woman flapping down the white wooden steps of the porch in her pink house shoes.

“*You* were worried. I knew she'd find the place all right,” mumbled the gray-haired man in overalls, leaning as far back as he could in an old rocking chair.

“It was no trouble,” Cadie lied. “You have a beautiful place here.” She awkwardly wrestled Darlene, Hayden's mother, over her leather satchel. Cadie realized quickly she wouldn't win this one over the bullheaded Darlene.

“Thank you,” Cadie said through her teeth.

“Now, Charlie, why don’t you come help Miss Cadie Ann with her other things?”

Darlene chimed.

Hearing her name, Cadie dropped her designer purse in the dirt, sending a cloud of dust over it.

“Shit!” she hissed. “I’m sorry, what’d you call me?”

“Oh dear, did I say something wrong? Charles, did I say something wrong? I always seem to do that. Roo *always* called you Cadie Ann over the phone. When he was still callin’ us, that is.” There was no animosity in her voice that Cadie could tell, which seemed strange to her. How could Darlene be so chipper at a time like this? Seeing her daughter-in-law for the first time in two years under such devastating circumstances, but Darlene acted as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

As Darlene talked, she flapped back up the porch steps, waddled passed the tilted figure of Charles, and gestured for Cadie to follow her into the house.

“Excuse my language, Mrs. Gishop. It’s just that Hayden’s the only one who ever called me Cadie Ann. I don’t usually go by my first and middle name.”

Darlene was humming as she hastened down the main hallway to the last door on the left, acting as if she hadn’t heard Cadie.

“We didn’t see you at the funeral, dear.”

“You’re wrong. I saw her!” yelled Charles from the porch.

“I stood in the back and left quickly. I had a business call I needed to make after.” That was a lie, and Cadie didn’t know why she said it.

“That’s alright, sweetie. I was just worried about you. I’m so glad you agreed to stay with us for the night. It’s a long trip to make in a day.”

“Thank you for having me.”

Cadie scanned the floral wallpapered walls decked out with old photographs until she recognized her Hayden in the face of a freckled, eight-year-old boy on the beach. The pain was instantaneous, almost debilitating. She caught her breath and stared down at Darlene’s pink fluffy house shoes, now muffled by the old hardwood flooring.

“I’m just curious. Why did you call Hayden *Roo*?” Cadie asked, feeling awkward in the silence as they entered the guest bedroom.

Darlene set her leather satchel down on the multi-colored quilt of deep blues and purples, whipping around at her question in surprise.

“Hun! You’re meaning to tell me that Roo never told you where he got his name?” Darlene’s greenish-gray eyes moistened. It was the first time Cadie had detected any sadness from a mother who had just lost her oldest son. The presence of a shared pain should have relieved Cadie, but it only made her feel embarrassed and more alone.

“No, Mrs. Gishop. He never told me about it. Never came up, I guess.”

“Call me Darlene, for gosh sake. I’ll let Charlie tell ya, he *loves* telling the story!”

Cadie followed the enthused Darlene back down the hall and into the living room. Why had she hated these people so much, people she had met only once and never took the time to know? Why had she refused to come here when Hayden had begged her to so many times? Like the family reunion last year, she could have taken time off from work. Or the cousins’ cookout the year before? Hayden had wanted to see the kids he had grown up playing with, but she had insisted they go to the company retreat instead.

“Charlie! Charles, hun! Come inside and tell dear, sweet Cadie about how Roo got his name.”

Darlene had a loud, booming West Texas accent, but when she spoke to Charles, her tone softened and smoothed like honey.

“Alright, alright, let me check on the chickens, and I’ll be in,” Charles complained as if she were putting him out.

“No, sir, I’ll do that. Come in and talk to your daughter-in-law,” Darlene ordered.

“Fine...” he grumbled through the screened-in door.

Cadie felt slightly anxious as she sunk into a plaid sofa. The walls in their small living room were brown; in fact, the whole room was brown. A brown wooden coffee table sat in the center, covered with the local newspaper, old books flipped open, and piles of mail separated into organized piles. Three wooden lamps placed around the room illuminated the brown, lightening the walls to caramel. A brick fireplace took up an entire wall, crowding the space in a cozy way. Cadie’s heart ached at the thought of Hayden growing up in this house. She was doing this for him.

“So, what do you wanna know?” Charles asked gruffly as he took a seat in the stiff armchair directly across from Cadie. Charles, Hayden’s father, looked to be about sixty-five. He had the same shaggy hair as Hayden, which gave them both a boyish appearance, except Charles’s hair was gray instead of light brown. The resemblance was uncanny. The same nose, the same gold-green eyes. She assumed the same wide, lopsided grin, except Cadie hadn’t seen Charles smile once. Unlike Darlene, Cadie could see the emotional toll that losing his son was having on him. His grief was easier for Cadie to relate to for some reason.

“I guess just start with Hayden when he was a boy. Oh, and why do you both call him Roo?” The scratchy couch cushions embraced Cadie, threatening to engulf her.

“Well,” Charles began, removing his glasses to wipe them with a light blue paisley handkerchief. “Roo is short for Rooster, a’ course. And everyone called Roo *Roo*, not just his ma and me. His classmates, people at church, everybody! Since he was about six years old. The story’s well-known around here. Unlike you city folk, we country people like to tell the same old stories.”

Cadie listened with a strange intensity. It seemed as if Hayden came alive in his father’s voice, as if he were in the room with them, smiling that charming, self-deprecating smile of his. She wondered if Hayden was looking down on her now, happy that she was here with his father, but then she shuddered at that possibility. Cadie couldn’t bear the thought of Hayden not being in a better place, but the idea that he might now know what she had planned to do on the day he died twisted her insides into knots. The shame was almost unbearable, but she pushed it away, far away, with slow, deep breaths.

Charles was saying, “The story goes, the week before Christmas Eve, Roo kept badgerin’ his ma over and over again about when Santa was comin’. You see, I promised him that Santa was gonna’ bring him a new saddle for his palomino, Sunny, one that looked just like the one Roy Roger’s had for his horse, Trigger. So, as you can imagine, the little tot could barely be wrestled into bed each night as the day approached. On Christmas Eve, Roo *begged* his ma if she could make Santa come early. And Darlene humbly confessed that even *she* couldn’t do that.”

Charles lit up as he recounted the memory. He, like Cadie, had chosen not to speak at the funeral, but now words spilled out smooth and shining, like stones at the bottom of a stream.

“But ole Roo, he didn’t take kindly to this. Darlene told him when she tucked him in that night he had to wait until the rooster crowed in the morning to see the presents Santa brought

him. And since *patient* wasn't a word in Roo's vocabulary—as you're probably well aware, Cadie—“

“He snuck out of bed at three A.M., wrestled the damn rooster to the ground, hauled him up to the roof, and tortured the crazy bird until it crowed loud enough to wake our parents up.”

Cadie jumped at the sudden interruption to Charles' narrative, turning to see a tall, skinny man standing in the doorway. He looked to be about twenty-six, two years younger than Hayden. He wore dark wash jeans (probably Wrangler's), a Harley-Davidson vintage T-Shirt, and a tan, thick rancher's jacket. Even though she had never met him, Cadie recognized Hayden's younger brother, Russ, based on the old pictures Hayden had shown her. When Hayden and Cadie were married, Russ had been serving in Afghanistan at the time.

Charles, completely unsurprised by his son's appearance and interruption, said, “How's Nelly and the foal doing?”

Russ pulled his jacket off and threw it on one of the hooks next to the front door without looking. He sat down next to Cadie with that undeniable Gishop grin, but Cadie spotted the grief in his green eyes like thorns. They looked like hers.

“Nelly didn't come up to eat tonight. Hey, you must be Cadie. I'm Russell,” he said, cordially extending his hand in her direction. “I saw you at the funeral, but didn't get a chance to talk to you.”

Cadie, placing her soft hand into his calloused one as they shook, wondered if that's what Hayden's hands used to look like, feel like when he worked on the ranch.

“Hi, nice to meet you,” her voice sounded scratchy, deeper than normal. She found herself blushing for no reason. “Your father was just telling me some stories about Hayden. I had no idea he was so...adventurous.” She talked about Hayden indifferently, as if he were some

celebrity or politician, a stranger she didn't know. The emotional distance helped her refrain from curling up into the fetal position when she had to speak his name in public.

"Yeah, there's a lot about Hayden I could tell ya that might surprise you," Russ said, trying to sound amused, but failing. Darlene appeared to be the only skilled actor in the Gishop family, and she hid her grief well enough for all of them.

"I don't doubt that at all," Cadie chuckled hollowly. "I can't believe he never told me about his nickname. I guess it must've been hard when Hayden went off to school in Austin, got a job in advertising. Married someone like me. I bet you all missed him terribly." The softness in her voice and the use of the past tense opened a valve of emotion that scared her, so she shut it off.

Charles squirmed in his chair, eyeing Russ intensely.

"Why don't you go check on that foal and make sure he's all right? It's strange Nelly didn't come up. It's not like her," Charles said gruffly, purposefully changing the subject.

Russ sighed, placing his large hands on his jeans to stand up.

"You got it, boss. Tell mama to keep dinner warm, will ya?"

Cadie suddenly felt a need for fresh air.

"I'll go, too! Let me grab my jacket."

The trek out to the back corner of their property took about twenty minutes. Cadie had changed into some old jeans, a sweatshirt and her heavy jacket, borrowing Darlene's rubber boots at Russ's insistence. She stayed close to his shadowy figure in the twilight, wondering how he found his way through the winding deer, cattle, and horse trails that cut through the trees and underbrush. Cadie only knew what to call the different trails because Russ told her what the trails

were and how one could tell which animal made them. The animal marks were unique, subtle indentations where others were flat, a smooth, two-part hoof versus a raccoon's human-like fingers. Little human fingers...

"We're almost there," Russ breathed, making white smoke in the cold, December evening.

"If something was wrong with the foal, why wouldn't the mother—or mare come up to eat? I didn't know horses were so maternal," Cadie asked hesitantly, pushing an overhanging branch out of her way as she followed Russ into a big opening. She thought she heard running water.

Russ laughed at her.

"*Of course* horses are maternal. They may have small brains, but that says nothing about their hearts. A mare will stand by her foal through thick and thin, defend it against wild animals, protect her little one, sometimes even if it means dying themselves."

Cadie cringed, her hand fluttering to her stomach.

"That's interesting."

"I see Nelly!" Russ exclaimed like a little boy. "Come on!"

Cadie followed the loping man across the field towards the ghostly apparition near a grove of trees. The moon was huge, casting an eerie glow across the meadow. Shadows at night always seemed unnatural.

"Nelly is a flea-bitten gray, so it's easy to spot her in the moonlight," Russ explained.

As they got closer, Nelly transformed from a ghostly apparition into a breathtaking specimen of power and grace. Her elegant neck, the smooth contours of her speckled-white back, the silver mane and tail glistening in the light left Cadie speechless. Russ looked concerned.

“She seems agitated. And I don’t see the foal. Where is he, sweetie?” he cooed over the mare as he caressed her neck.

Cadie could now see the fear in Nelly’s huge black eyes, the way she breathed in quick, short breaths through her nostrils. She kept stomping the ground with her right front leg, as if trying to tell them something.

“Let’s look around these trees and brush and see if we can find him. He can’t be far. Nelly wouldn’t leave him,” Russ said.

Cadie obeyed, taking a cluster of brush slightly to the right of Nelly. After only a few moments, Cadie spotted what looked to be an animal lying under some overhanging branches of cedar bushes. She grew excited, ecstatic even, at finding the foal so quickly. Rather than calling out to Russ, she lowered down to her hands and knees and awkwardly crawled towards the sleeping foal. The young foal was much different than his mother, with his furry sorrel coat and his long, gawky legs stretched out before him. His face was so small and skinny and expressive with a thick white blaze down the middle that matched one of his white stocking legs.

“You’re so beautiful,” Cadie whispered.

She reached to touch him, but at the moment her fingers met his body, she recoiled in shock.

“Oh my God!”

The hardened abdomen of the foal felt stiff and unnatural under her fingers. The newborn beast must have been dead for hours, perhaps even all day. The cold temperature had preserved the body, but the rigidity was so disturbing to Cadie. Where there should have been warmth and life and breath, there was only a lifeless, frozen thing. Cadie couldn’t move. She couldn’t take her eyes off the dead foal.

Suddenly, the unblinking, unseeing eye of the foal transformed into a fetus, floating in the nebulous space of a dark, shadowy sonogram photo. Cadie gasped, covering her mouth to contain the sobs. Russ ran over from where he was searching.

“Cadie! What’s wrong?! Everything okay?”

Cadie looked up through the interlacing branches of trees into the crystal clear, dark sky now speckled with stars. So many stars, so many points of light and energy and *life*. Life...and she had wanted to kill one of them, a part of Hayden that would have been lost to her forever.

“He’s dead.”

Stones had to cover the foal’s grave, so scavengers wouldn’t dig him up. In the moonlight, Cadie picked up rocks lying around near the east corner of the property, while Charlie used his rusting yellow Ford tractor to dig the hole. Russ pitched in by watering the solid, desiccated ground to make it soft enough to dig into.

Cadie hadn’t seen Hayden’s grave being dug. She hadn’t stayed to see her husband lowered into the ground. Too painful. But she was here now.

Her soft hands gripped the wooden handle of a shovel, and she dug alongside Russ to break up the stubborn dry dirt. She watched the earth give way to the water. She witnessed the fragile body with his dangling head and gawky long legs gently laid into the ground. She saw everything. No one spoke.

Through it all, Cadie, covered in dirt and sweat, never stopped crying.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,” Charlie finally said in the cold dark, throwing a large rock onto the growing pile atop the grave.

“Amen,” Russ mumbled.

Cadie said nothing. She fingered the black and white photograph in her jacket pocket. She thought about the hope and life that this foal had brought this grieving family and even to herself momentarily—only to be taken away so suddenly. Pain upon pain. It was three A.M. and the three gravediggers were exhausted when they returned on the tractor, Russ and Cadie balancing on the back as Charlie drove up to the house.

While Charles parked the tractor, Cadie and Russ walked into the warm light of the kitchen. It felt alive and human. Darlene's kind face contorted in sympathy for the weary workers, hugging them both for a long time. Cadie tensed at first, then released into the embrace, too exhausted to fight affection. The three of them seemed to share a grief too deep to express in words, an emotion strong enough to break down the walls between strangers. Death united them, but Cadie also felt guilt for what she had done and what she had planned to do.

“Let me fix ya'll something to eat,” Darlene said matter-of-factly, wiping a stray tear from her eye. “Russ, put a pot of coffee on. Cadie, why don't you go shower? You'll feel much better.”

Cadie did as she was told.

As the hot, steaming water struck her sapped body, Cadie couldn't help thinking about Nelly. The panicked, confused mare had followed Russ as he carried her lifeless foal away. Nelly didn't understand what was happening, so she neighed after him helplessly—a high-pitched heartbreaking whinny. How could an animal care so much? How could a beast love its baby so faithfully, so instantaneously when—a memory fell from the showerhead, her mother's voice:

“Cadie, sweetie, you know when you were born I hated you—unexplainably so. I worried I might even hurt you. It's an actual condition, you know. When I had you and a week later your

father abandoned us with that bitch of a secretary, I suffered from such an intense form of postpartum depression that I wouldn't even touch you." Cadie's mother sat at her large desk, having paused from writing an email to one of her clients to have a serious conversation with her twelve-year-old daughter.

Her mother's words continued to flow from the showerhead, "Your grandmother bottle-fed you, cared for you for months before I was able to recover. It just shows the power of counseling and determination. I really see so much of myself in you, Cadie sweetie. So, that's why Granny lived with us for a time."

Granny had died too soon. And, the four-year-old Cadie experienced a mother's love spoken in words, but rarely acted out. She became a prop in her mother's carefully constructed, stylized life: the beautiful daughter for everyone to admire but ignore.

She remembered the pain of her mother's revelation. She had never imagined herself caring for a child, taking on the responsibility of someone else's life. She wasn't equipped. It had seemed so obvious to her.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Darlene's voice penetrated the hot water trance: "Coffee's gettin' cold! And I have fresh chocolate chip cookies on the table."

She had made the call to the abortion clinic to set an appointment for the same day Hayden would die in a terrible car crash. Cadie never could have predicted that she'd be having coffee and cookies at four A.M., after attending two funerals with his estranged family a week later. The absurdity of life struck Cadie as she listened to Charlie talk about the mechanical problems of his old tractor, Russ relive a funny memory of Hayden and him involving a dirt bike, and Darlene muse about how Hayden loved blueberries as a boy but hates them as an adult.

Cadie didn't contribute, but she relished hearing about Hayden in the present tense. His family, those dearest to him other than herself, still viewed him as alive—call it denial, call it whatever you want. Cadie didn't care. It was comforting. Over coffee and cookies, with dawn brightening the kitchen windows on the cusp of morning, Hayden lived on for these people.

As she had stood there beside the foal's grave, a grave she helped dig with Hayden's father and brother, Cadie knew Hayden was gone for good. In the covering of night with the icy wind blowing over the gravediggers, Cadie accepted Hayden would never feel the wind again, never work side by side with his father and brother as she had done, never know the joy of a newborn colt or the pain of burying one, never again hold her closely through the night as she slept so peacefully and loved...and never feel the pride of holding his own child in his arms.

He was buried in the ground, and this world would know him no more. Cadie knew it was time to focus on the living, time to atone for the guilt and get on with life as Hayden would have wanted her to do. With a deep breath, during the next pause in the conversation, she voiced the words she had never said aloud, even to her husband:

“I'm pregnant.”