

*The Mourners*

It's 4:32 p.m. on a Tuesday at Corpus Christi Church on oak-tree-lined Hartzell Drive in Pacific Palisades and my married boyfriend is dead in the open casket next to the podium at which his sister speaks. The sunlight filtering through the stained-glass window behind the pulpit illuminates the church dimly. I smooth my skirt. This is the first funeral of two that I'm being paid to attend today. The stained glass seems like it should make the room technicolor but in fact the light is just dusty. My dead lover, Christian, looks peaceful, laying in the casket, and I envy that he gets to lie down.

The church smells like old books and the pews that radiate in a half-circle from the oak pulpit at the head of the room are almost empty. The mourners, the ten that have showed up, are in various configurations of black suits and dresses. We, Sandra and I, the two Mourners, sit in the third row, crying in audible sobs. I feel nauseous from my hangover. My tears are real and very confusing. I look over at Sandra, who is also crying, and I wonder if I am crying loudly enough.

"Am I crying loudly enough?" I whisper.

She nudges me with her elbow and I put my hand to my lips to hold in a dry heave.

"Ow," I say and check the time on my iPhone.

The deceased's--Christian Bechdel's--sister stands at the pulpit delivering a eulogy involving his work with the poor of Uganda or Guatemala (somewhere foreign, with a "g"). She reads from a paper, looking up for a split second every paragraph break returning to her speech. Her voice is monotone, unbroken. She seems bored.

I shift uncomfortably in the pew--there's a cushion but it doesn't really help--and consider the corpse of my now-ex- or late- or dead-boyfriend. I try to focus on running through my C.A.R.E. (Cry

Audibly, Relate Emotionally) steps that our manager repeats ad nauseum but I keep thinking about Christian and whether seeing him again was on my priority list. Every time he left I agreed with myself that it was the last time--no more answering his texts at 2 a.m. and putting on the underwear he liked and my hair into some kind of order--but then he would text and I would put on the underwear and at least change into a clean t-shirt. Often this would include staring at myself in the mirror, hard, while holding a mostly-empty bottle of white wine and feeling my stomach to see how much it planned on bulging.

"--he was always jetting off to some village or other, trying to help out those less fortunate than himself--"

Untrue, as far as I knew, but I couldn't begrudge her trying to create a positive feeling about her now-late brother. How could he have died? I rewind to the last time I saw Christian, which was two days ago. He alternated hands holding his cell phone as he struggled into his blazer and answered his wife's second phone call in as many minutes. I sat on the couch, under my comforter. He kissed me on the cheek and bit his lip and thrust his hips like a pornographic Elvis impersonator while he told his wife he was being held up but would get dinner on the way home. I giggled despite myself and rolled my eyes and he said "No, just someone else on the elevator told a joke." He looked happy when he left.

"--he was just such a kind man," the sister--Miranda, I think--says, and her voice cracks a little. Sandra sobs loudly, twice. Miranda starts crying and wiping the tears from her cheeks. "And now he's gone and--" she's really crying now. "and I just miss my baby brother so much."

She breaks down in tears, steps away from the microphone, and a serious and professional-looking man with big muscles and a blond crew cut wearing a black suit, and a black

button-down, with a black tie (a ridiculous amount of black) comes to her aid, taking her by the elbow and leading her away from the microphone as she puts her head on his shoulder for support.

I take a swig of the vodka-Gatorade that I have kept in my purse as a hangover cure. It's important that I replenish my electrolytes, although this one is too strong. I cough once.

I wonder how it happened. Car accident, probably, although it's open casket, so it couldn't have been too bad. I pictured Christian slumped over the wheel of his black Jaguar.

("XKR 175," he told me when he first helped me into the passenger seat and pointed out the '1 of 175' inscription on the silver runner. "That means that there were only 175 of these made."

"Wow," I said, and I could tell he wanted me to be more impressed. "That's really cool.")

The horn would be going off, and the front and side airbags deployed while smoke rose from the engine in a noxious cloud. He would have hit a tree, the one near Amalfi, where Sunset curves the most sharply. There are always flowers there, memorializing some high school kid or another flying off the road in his new BMW. Now they would be there for Christian. He would have been alone, but he would have been driving too fast, maybe to try to race home before his wife noticed him missing. I had this picture in my mind; the smells of rubber and oil, the people stopping their cars to clap hands to mouths and call 911. The rubberneckers who drove by in their Priuses, hoping their kids wouldn't see. There would be sirens in the background, dopplering closer. I cry loudly because it's a horrible thing to think about.

Sandra squeezes my leg in what looks like contrition but is in fact a combination 'you-go-girl'

and transference of a sigh of relief. There is a new woman at the lectern now, one wearing all-black with the exception of a pair of familiar-looking jade earrings that I notice as she brushes her blonde hair behind her ears.

"A woman always looks best in jade," Christian told me as we sat in a table in the middle of Ink. as he handed me a jewelry box and told me to try them on. That was a dinner I'd rather forget--he had to run home because his wife had gotten an earlier flight home from her trip to visit her mother--and I had concluded the night by getting too-stoned and debating texting him as I ate an entire sleeve of Oreos while watching Netflix.

"Christian was a good husband," she said. "He always made sure that we were taken care of, provided for, no matter how many times he had to stay late. He was always willing to go that extra mile." She looks down and I swear I see her dab a handkerchief under her eyes, but she is probably just wiping away tears, because when she looks back up she's crying. Uncontrollably, too, the tears just streaming down her face. "He was always there to help out everyone as much as he could."

The crowd--the ten people--is silent but attentive. I love it when they're already crying--makes my job that much easier. No need to bring the grief up if it's already there. I sob once, loudly, anyways, for good measure and this seems to calm her down. It's our job to make sure everyone knows the deceased is missed, to help them access their pain. The body looks unrealistic, like the corpse is a stunt double buried in a very sharp suit and Christian's favorite tie. His nose, unmistakably his nose, sits in the middle of his face like a miniature Mount Everest, daring you to find it unattractive. The lips seem to turn

up in the corners, a sneer.

The woman, the wife, continues her speech. I check my phone. No calls, no texts. I feel a little lightheaded from the booze this early in the morning. Maybe I should beg out of the other funeral. Say I feel some illness coming on. I probably shouldn't drive home, since I seem to be getting drunker than I planned to. Probably will have to find a nice shady spot to park my Jetta and curl up on the passenger seat. I take another swig of my vodka-Gatorade and grimace. Much too strong this time.

I sob and try to focus on the woman making the speech.

“--and I hope that Christian is looking down on us right now from a better place.”

The same man helps this woman--Anna--down from the altar. I stare at her, hard, as she walks back to her seat in the front of the church. Her face is blotchy and the only thing keeping her hair from looking insane is the hat she has on. There's no accounting for the taste of men. The priest resumes his place at the dais. He leads the congregation in one last hymn. I stand, and hold onto the pew in front of me with one finger. This really is not a good sign for the rest of my day.

Midway through the hymn, Sandra presses something cool and metallic into my palm. I look at her, continuing to mouth the words to the song.

“It's gum,” she whispers into my ear. “You smell like a distillery, dear, please take it it.”

As the song concludes, people begin to file out of the church. I want to go look at the dead body to confirm or deny its Christian-ness, but Sandra grabs my arm and we walk out with the small group of mourners. I do not want to fight the tide.

I walk out of the church and into the dusklight. I put on my sunglasses against the glare.

"How are you, dear?" Sandra asks. She's a good friend, or at least a good Mourner. Very conscientious. We're sitting on a bench, under one of the oak trees that provide shade to the church courtyard. The leaves are on the verge of turning brown and falling off, and a few of them have floated to the grey concrete.

"I'm fine," I say and sniffle a little bit. I feel sick. "A little sick, maybe."

"You seemed really..." she puts her hand my shoulder. "Out of it."

"Yeah, I'm just sick," I say. "I'm sorry."

"Did you know the deceased?" she says, whispering.

"No," I say. "No, no. Why?"

"I don't know, it just seemed like you recognized him."

"I just," my phone buzzes. "I'm having a weird day, I'm sorry. I thought I saw someone I knew, but I didn't."

"Who?"

"It was, uh," I can't think of a lie. "My boyfriend."

"I didn't know you--"

I put my hand out, palm down, signaling her to lower her voice. She looks over her shoulder. Nobody is paying attention.

"I didn't know you had a boyfriend," she says at a whisper.

"Yep," I say and nod.

"Who?" she says.

I signal into the church with my eyes.

“Oh my,” she says. “Not?”

“Yep.”

“Oh my.”

“I know,” I say.

“What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea. I have the Anderson service this afternoon out in Brentwood, but...”

“Dear, I don’t know if--” she says. “And you’re so *drunk*.”

“Shh.” I check to make sure nobody is listening. “It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I suppose not. Even still, I don’t think you should be driving. Certainly you shouldn’t be driving.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m just looking out for your best interests here. Let me call the office and let them know you’re not going to make it.”

“Ok.”

“Jessica--”

“I said ok. I need some time to think about, you know, everything.”

"Well, if you want to talk--"

"Yeah, thanks, but I have to go, my agent just called."

"Of course," she said, and smiled and I can tell that she can tell I'm lying by the calm in her eyes.

I walk back into the church. As I push open one-half of the oaken double-doors leading into the

church, the calmness of the place assaults me. I have to clear my throat, but I don't want to. I have to make sure it's really him. The church is quiet now, not that it wasn't before, but now that there's nobody in the chapel there's an even deeper calm. My heels click with each step I take and the cooler air in here does wonders for my nausea. I feel my shoulders unwind.

There is another woman standing over the coffin. She's a step back, her arms crossed, leaning back on her left leg. It's Miranda, the sister. I can tell from behind by the way she holds her head. She's rail thin, with little in the way of curves, all business. I cough a little to let her know that I'm here. She turns halfway around, gives a curt nod, and resumes looking at her dead brother in the casket. I walk up, next to her, and I can see the little ray of light (that might be natural or might be a spotlight just there for funerals) illuminating Christian's face. It's him, no doubt about it.

We look at him, solemnly, for a second, like people trying to understand a confusing piece of modern art.

"Fuck," she says.

"Yep," I say.

There is a silence.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I say.

She turns to me with little emotion in her eyes.

"Thanks," she says. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Mourner. One of the Mourners."

"Ah," she says, and smiles with just her mouth. She returns to looking at her dead brother.

I want to say something. To reach out and touch her shoulder and tell her that I know, that he



was a good man. That I understood him and I know what she is going through. I turn and walk out the back door.

A few oak trees shelter the concrete loading dock behind the church. The sun has set behind the row of houses that face the gate into the parking lot, so I take off my sunglasses.

“Hey,” someone calls to me.

Anna sits on the bench formed by the concrete, looking at the exit to the church. I turn around, face the ivy-covered-brick, then turn again to face her. I’m going to have to have a conversation. She sits with her black-stockinged legs dangling, banging her shoes against the grey concrete in syncopated rhythm.

“Come over here,” she says.

I look around, making sure that nobody else is in the parking lot, then sigh and walk towards her. It’s nice out and there’s a breeze, but I’m still nauseous and the drink that I have in my purse has only mitigated the problem, not solved it. It feels like there is a wave of grief about to crest and crash down on me. I sniff and decide not to cry. I want to go home, smoke a joint, take a nap, and forget about this whole day. She has blonde hair, high cheekbones and full lips. She has an ok body, although it’s hard to tell; black is slimming and the light is failing. I feel a twinge of jealousy, that this woman would get to have Christian every night, or nearly-every, if she wanted. But she didn’t, and I did, and the world is unfair sometimes.

“Sit,” she says and pats the concrete next to her. I hesitate. I really don’t want to talk to my dead boyfriend’s recent widow. “Oh come on for fuck’s sake, I’m not going to bite you.”

“Hi,” I say. I reach out and touch her shoulder. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“No,” she says, after looking down at my hand, which I withdraw. “You’re not, but it’s fine. Do you have a cigarette?”

“Yeah,” I’m not sure what to make of this.

“Can I have one?”

I open my yellow box of American Spirits and shake one out for her. I’m down to my last two.

“And a light? I’m sorry.”

“Sure,” I light her cigarette and one of my own. “I’m Jessica, by the way.”

“Oh you’re the Mourner,” she says, and sounds disappointed and a little relieved. “I’m Anna. Nice to meet you. Thank you for coming. Although, I guess we pay you enough.”

“Who did you think I was?.”

“I thought I was sharing a cigarette with Christian’s mistress for a second,” she smiles, half-way and laughs in a way that sounds more like a bark than an expression of joy.

“Well, um, you’re not?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, it’s just...”

“...”

“I mean, there’s nobody here,” she says. “Like, actually nobody. I mean, you figure like an old college roommate or something, but--” she taps some ash off the end of her cigarette.

“Well,” I say. “Maybe it’s good. Maybe grief should be private.”

“Yeah,” I realize, looking at her hand, that she’s holding Christian’s Blackberry. I turn my iPhone to silent and put it into my pocket. “I know that he was cheating on me.”

"What?" I say. I wonder if I sound too surprised. Or not surprised enough. This is a good acting lesson.

"Yep," she says. "God knows how. He wasn't exactly a social butterfly."

"I'm sure he was..."

"Was what?"

"I don't know," I take a swig of my Gatorade bottle. Did not burn so bad this time, probably not a good sign. "I'm sure he wasn't cheating on you."

"That's very nice of you to say but I don't think you have any idea. What is that?" she asks.

"It's Gatorade," I say, enunciating each syllable carefully.

"I can see that, but what else is in it."

"Vodka," I say. "Want some?"

She takes the bottle and a long drink. She coughs. "Wow."

"Yeah, sorry."

"No. Thank you. It's just... fuck," more coughing. "It's like college or something."

"Oh?"

"Christian and I used to sneak bottles like that into everything."

"Oh," I say.

"When you can't afford it, you just find a way. That was how we started. He'd sneak us into the back door of concerts or distract a security guard while I slipped into the fence. I think that made me fall in love with him. That he could always get us in wherever. Once, he actually goaded a bouncer into punching him in the face so we could both get into a club for free. That was horrifying. Absolutely

horrifying. Still, I think that's when I fell for him. Like, really fell for him. Is that weird? That that's when I fell in love with him?"

"No," I said. "I've fallen in love for less."

"I like you Jessica," she says. "But you don't know shit about love."

"Probably true," I say instead of "You don't either."

We sit in silence, staring at the mourners filing out of the church to their various cars. We each take swigs of my Gatorade bottle, which has now fully gone to my head. I feel like there's a family of marmots cuddling around my brain. That I'm having that thought is evidence that I need to stop drinking.

As the parking lot clears out, we see a lone figure advancing towards us. I recognize him from the funeral. He wears a dark suit with a white shirt and walking quickly, checking to the left and to the right to see if he's being watched. His grey hair waves above his head like a stockbroker's from 80s movies if they didn't put in hair gel. He buttons and unbuttons his blazer's top button twice before he reaches us.

"Anna," he says. He looks like he expects her to get up and offer him a hug. Instead, he leans forward, drops one hand, and pats her awkwardly on the shoulder. She does not stop looking at his face. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," she says. The night deepens around us and the electric light casts us into shadows.

"Christian, was, ah," he looks at me, trying to figure out who I am and if it would be profitable to ask. "A good man, and all of us around the firm are sorry to see him go. Not see him go, that sounds... We're sorry for your loss, and we feel it, too."

"Thank you."

"What I'm trying to say, Anna," he seems to want to put his hand on her shoulder, again, but thinks better of it, puts it in his pocket. "Is that if you need anything, financially, emotionally, you know, whatever, don't hesitate to call on me or any of the other partners. We exist to be called on, for those things. Any wife of Christian's is--well, we all just consider each other family."

"That's very kind of you, Jason. Isn't that kind, Jessica?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Yes, well," he looks at me, since clearly he has not accounted for me as a person whose opinions count for something. We are together, in that opinion. "Like, I said, very sorry. I'll, ah, make sure that my wife sends over a dish. To help. And, obviously, if you need a shoulder to cry on, I'm were. We're here. My wife and I."

He plays with his wedding band.

"That's very nice of you. Tell your wife I say hello."

"Of course," he says and puts his hand on her shoulder again, more of a tap this time. "Well, don't be a stranger. We're very sorry."

"You mentioned that," she says. "And thank you, really."

She gets up, they hug, I smile while remaining seated on the loading dock. He mutters goodbye and runs his hand through his hair as he walks back to his car, a black Mercedes coupe, and his shoulders slump as he opens the door.

We return to silence, to trading swigs, to staring into the parking lot, which is now empty,

except for our cars.

"I have a question," I say and we turn to each other.

"Ok," she says.

"What would you tell her."

"Her?"

"The, you know, the other woman."

"I'll tell her," she blows out a puff of smoke. "Fuck, I don't know. That she's ruined my family--my future family--and that she's going to have it on her conscience her entire life? That she's made me miserable and how would she feel? That she's a fucking slut and I hate her?"

"Wow," I say and hand her back the bottle. "Pretty harsh."

She snorts. "I guess so."

"That's..."

"Yeah."

"I read her texts. Their texts."

A silence. Does she know it's me?

"Can I see them?"

"See what?"

"The texts."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I just want to."

"Fine," and she hands me the phone. As I open it I halfway expect to see my own name or maybe "Jessica Mourner" in the address bar. He's left it blank. Just the phone number. Still, it seems inescapably mine, like that number could not belong to anybody but me. I wonder why he didn't put a name. Maybe some sort of plausible deniability thing. Like, "hey honey, I don't know, this weird number has been texting me, and I just keep agreeing to meet them, which sounds strange, I know, but I'm just messing with them, so don't worry."

It's a strange experience, reading my texts back, from this new perspective. I want to look through the rest of his phone, to see the things that he has hidden from me, but I restrict myself to his conversation with me. Seeing myself through his eyes, his wife's eyes, is weird. I look desperate, childish. The texts only go back three days, but I there's a string of "can't wait to see you"s and "i want you so bad"s that embarrass me. Hopefully in a way that's not showing. I want to look to see how she's looking at me, but I don't want to risk it.

"Wow," I say and hand her back the phone. "It looks like a horny twelve year old wrote these."

"I know," she says and cocks her head at me. "People are strange."

"You think you'll feel better?"

"I don't know. Maybe. There's a chance. Fifty percent chance. Maybe we can both cry afterwards and get a drink. More drinks. This is too many drinks," she holds up the Gatorade bottle, which is almost empty. "I think."

"Listen," I say. "What about this?"

"What about what?"

"We're friends, right? Well, not friends, but, we have an understanding?"

"Sure."

"Just say to me what you would say to her. Lay it all on the line."

"Why? Why can't I just wait?"

"Two reasons," I hiccough. At least I don't feel nauseous anymore, and the marmots I imagine living upstairs are doing a lovely job warming my brain. "First, because then you won't have to see this woman, who ruined your life, and might be really pretty... Or worse, might just be an absolute train wreck. You can just say it all, everything you want, and then you have it out, and then she doesn't get the satisfaction-- She doesn't get the fucking sa-tis-fac-tion of knowing how much power she has."

"If she has any power."

"Right."

"Ok, what's the second reason?"

"Reason number B is that we can leave this parking lot, because it's getting cold and both of us should go home."

"Ok."

"Ok?"

"Ok."

"Go ahead."

She looks at me for a long moment, taking in my face for the first time. Her eyes are half-lidded. This woman cannot handle her alcohol. I adjust my hair. Her lips tremble, quiver. I think she might be about to cry. I desperately want her not to be about to cry. The sun has now disappeared from the parking lot and the lights are on. I am chilly, I rub my arms against the cold. She raises her eyebrows.



She opens her mouth. I prepare for the worst. She laughs: a high, silvery sound that starts as a giggle and moves from there into a chuckle and then a full-on guffaw. It echoes from the brickwork and the gate ringing the parking lot. I laugh with her.

"Oh, fuck it," she says, wiping a tear from her eye and sniffing. "Let's go home."

"Alright," I say. We stand, each of us a little unsteady. I wonder if she knows; if this is why she's calling off this vigil early. I wonder if she feels that she's made her point. Probably not, otherwise she would never have agreed to share a drink with me. Probably she's just lost and wondering who this woman could be. That it certainly could not be me. We say our goodbyes and hug and I wish her luck and she does the same to me. I get in my car; I chew a piece of gum. She's walking out of the front gate—her house must be close. I look back at her in the rearview mirror. She's making a phone call. I look at my phone, waiting for it to ring, for her to call me unwittingly. The only thing I hear is distant sirens, probably the cops going to rescue a cat from a tree.