

## Where a Small Heart Once Beat

Rebecca's accident had numbed her in a way no anesthetic could have, the effects lingering for months. Long before it happened, while growing up, she'd foreseen her life in successive steps: college, business school, a church wedding, children. Now, that notion of order and planning is completely foreign to her, like a textbook on Astrophysics has replaced her life's simple To Do List. Still, months have passed, and she thinks maybe she's ready to get back to the routines of work—the smart business suits, the commuter rail, and the corner office overlooking the Greenway.

She sits across from her husband at a mahogany table in the formal dining room of their suburban house—a newly constructed, partially furnished Victorian—tapping with her unpolished fingernails on a glass of red wine. “I'm worried,” Rebecca says, though ‘worry’ may be overstating it. She is aware of a feeling, and this is as close as she can come to defining it.

“You're not ready to go back to work yet, Becca,” he says without emotion. “How was therapy?” She'd once found his calm demeanor extremely attractive, even comforting. He'd had this ability to quiet her insecurities in a way she never found to be controlling. He was especially good at knowing when to let the silence fill the empty spaces around them. This, she once thought, is why I love him.

“Therapy is therapy,” she says. “What do you want me to say?”

It isn't the *sensation* of feeling that has gone missing since the accident. (Rebecca hates that word—‘accident.’ If ever there was an act of God, this was it.) She'd always believed the feeling would come back, and it has. But, the sympathy? The empathy? The location in her heart that had once safeguarded the ability to care about a new thing is now gone. She can think of no other experience in life capable of eradicating these qualities with such enthusiastic precision.

“Hey,” he says, “since the accident...”

“Goddamnit, stop calling it that,” she says. “You fell off your mountain bike that time—*that* was an accident.”

“I’m just using the doctor’s term for it.”

“Those idiot doctors can call it whatever the *hell* they want.” She’s crying. “Do you see me? Do you see me at all?”

“I’m just saying,” he says, pausing as he often does to ensure what he says next is thoughtful. “There’s risk.” He looks first at her, in her eyes, and then stares at the wall behind her, which is the same color as a red cherry tomato. They’d chosen the paint color after having seen it in *Architectural Digest*. The walls of the dining room are accented with crown molding and chair rail, all finished in a glossy white. A china closet, built into the corner of the room, sits empty except for a white serving platter with gold leaf. This is her favorite room in the house.

“It’s all risk,” Rebecca says, as if to write off his statement. She reaches for her wine glass, takes a drink and then looks at him with her chin raised in a royal pose. “Just look at your left leg and hip.”

“Funny.”

“Not laughing,” she says. “I can’t even laugh about that day anymore.”

Once, a year or so before Rebecca’s pregnancy, he’d taken a nasty fall mountain biking on Monadnock. His front tire had hit a gap on the rocky trail, catapulting him over his handlebars and down a 25-foot drop. She watched his descent of the steep embankment, scraping his way over a gray outcropping, in awe of his almost perfect imitation of a baseball player sliding into home plate. There was a time when she’d told this story to friends and she’d embellish it by yelling “Safe!” to describe his landing, always eliciting laughter from the audience.

When she’d reached him, nearly tumbling over herself headfirst on the way, the blood from his injured leg and hip flowed like the hand of God Himself squeezed it out of him. And it

wouldn't stop. Rebecca thought then and there, looking into his eyes as he calmly reassured her he was fine: *Okay, so this is how some things end.*

Then, without warning, a group of younger mountain bikers swooped in like super heroes. Three couples in multi-colored Lycra and helmets gathered around her bleeding husband looking like the height of fashion and confidence. As one of the women, a med student, took control, her male riding partner stood by holding a clear blue water bottle, expressionless. He was tall and out of breath in his black and yellow outfit that matched the med student's. Sweat dripped from the curly dark hair poking out from under his black helmet onto his shoulders and down his firm biceps. Rebecca thought she could actually hear his heartbeat—as if in this moment her instincts anticipated a day when nothing would be more important to her than hearing a heart beating strong with promise. The thumping drowned out the voice of the med student talking to her.

“What?”

“He'll be okay,” the med student said. “Your husband.”

“Oh,” Rebecca said as she watched the woman wiping her husband's blood from her hands using water from her riding partner's bottle.

Every time her husband comes to bed now in his underwear, Rebecca encounters the scars from his bike accident. The skin is uneven and rough, like a pineapple. There was also a scar of sorts on their baby's neck—a narrow, bright red abrasion from the umbilical cord. Rebecca's scars, though, aren't as obvious to the naked eye. They're hidden under the skin below her navel, where a void that feels as large to her as this house grows larger every day, and where a small heart once beat with vigor, expectant.

END