

I fell in love in bits and pieces.

It started with Henry's feet, the night we waited, on the hill behind my apartment building, for a meteor shower that it was too overcast to see. We were on lawn chairs and talking and laughing and passing a lone bottle of beer back and forth, and I said, "I hope we don't fall asleep out here" right before I fell asleep. When I awoke who knows how many minutes later, he was still next to me, breathing deeply, eyes closed so that his enviably long lashes grazed his cheekbones. Fascinated as I was by this perfect specimen, I stared, taking that precious opportunity to study him in a way that I wouldn't dare with his knowledge, until I realized that his feet were rocking back and forth in time to the beat of the cricket chirps. When I lifted my gaze back to his face, his eyes were open and he was smiling.

"You're awful," I said, feeling my cheeks grow hot.

"Like what you see?" He waggled his thick black eyebrows at me, and I fell in love with those, too.

"Whatever."

He kissed me for the first time that night, and I fell in love with his lips.

The left elbow came after an especially spirited game of Frisbee when he, in his dogged determination to keep the disc in the air, dove right into a water fountain. I cleaned and bandaged his injury and spoon fed him ice cream when he claimed it was too painful to hold the bowl. "I'm almost certain you're not *that* hurt," I said, perched on the uncomfortable metal edge of the futon that had once served as his bed but was, by that time, used exclusively as a sofa.

"You may be right," he responded, "but I'll come up with any excuse to be this close to you."

And so I fell in love with his words.

Before long, I realized I loved the entire man. It was inevitable, really. He was the only guy I'd met who shared my passion for low-budget horror movies and accepted my fondness of cold leftover

Chinese takeout and understood how incredibly important it was to laugh at someone's jokes, even if it was just to be polite. He brought me books that he thought I would like, and chicken soup when I wasn't feeling well, and warmth and security and joy. I'd find myself gazing at him sometimes, unable to believe that he'd picked me to spend his time with, when I knew he could have any woman he wanted. And when he knelt before me, trembling with nerves, and asked if I would be his wife, my response was immediate: "Absolutely." I hadn't believed myself to be incomplete before I met him, but once he was in my life, I couldn't imagine a world without him.

Now years have passed, and I'm standing at the kitchen sink, watching the soap suds slowly dissolve.

"Here you are." Hank comes in, startling me out of my reverie. I'd forgotten he was even here.

"Here I am."

He puts his hands on my shoulders. "You do realize you have a dishwasher."

"Actually, I was just —"

"—thinking about Dad."

"Yes."

My firstborn reaches into the dishwater and gently pries my hands off of a glass. "Why don't you come watch TV with us?" he suggests.

I look up at him (he's been taller than me since the age of twelve) and do my best to smile.

"Maybe later."

He gives me a look, so much like his father it's eerie, that says he doesn't believe me. "Well, you can't stand here all night."

Henry and I had reached the precarious age where a lot of the couples we knew were couples no more. Some were divorced, but others had been touched by illness and, subsequently, death. We watched friends succumb to heart disease and cancer and other things that had once seemed impossible. And through it all, we'd breezed through unscathed, and made sure to remind ourselves and each other of how blessed we were that we had.

Then one day, he left me.

I was told over the phone.

I had been baking a cake for him, to celebrate the publication of his latest book. He had just run out to pick up steaks for dinner; he was supposed to be right back.

By the time I finally looked away from the bowl of now congealed cake batter, the sun had set. I had stood in the same spot for six hours.

*So, you're mistaken, Hank. I can stand here all night.*

"You're right," I say, though, to appease my son. I dry my hands on the dishtowel that Henry always made fun of ("Who thought it would be a good idea to put filthy chickens on something that touches dishes?") and follow Hank into the family room.

"You can be the tie-breaker," he says. "We can't pick a movie."

"What are the choices?" I ask, plopping down next to my daughter, whose face is, of course, inches from her cell phone.

"Hank wants to watch something stupid," Ashley says without tearing her gaze away from the screen in her hand. "Something about spies."

"It's not as stupid as some unrealistic romantic comedy," he replies.

"Yeah, like someone can really fit a bomb in a *pen*."

"I'd believe that before—"

"Why don't we watch a Christmas movie?" I cut in.

My kids look at each other, and I identify the message that passes between them: *Mom's crazy.*

"Um...it's April," Hank says.

"So? Does that mean Christmas doesn't exist, just because it's warm outside?"

"Christmas movies are so *corny*," Ashley whines.

"Then it's settled," I say, "because we ALL like corn."

I select a DVD and my children grudgingly settle down for the movie, though I sense that their disgruntlement is a bit contrived, simply because it's how they're expected to behave.

The truth is that I haven't celebrated Christmas – or anything else, for that matter – in the nearly two years that their father has been gone. And though I was aware even as it was occurring, I'd completely neglected Hank and Ashley, so encompassed was I by my grief. In the beginning, I thought I would never enjoy anything again, or laugh, or smile, or not be in pain. I'd been abandoned by my best friend, my biggest champion, my reason for living. I couldn't picture myself trying to go on with my life – what life was there, without Henry?

My sister was the one who snapped me out of it. "I know your husband is gone," Jane said, "but so is your children's father." When she put it that way, I knew I had to make an effort for them, if for no other reason. And I felt like the worst mother in the world for not having recognized that on my own.

Halfway through the movie, Ashley is knocked out, curled in a ball on the loveseat, and good thing, too, because we're getting to the corniest part, where the superficial family realizes the true meaning of Christmas. "Have you thought about dating?" Hank suddenly asks.

I stare at my son uncomprehendingly for a moment. "Me?"

"Yes, you."

"I'm too old to date."

He gives me one of his father's looks again. "You're fifty-four."

"So?"

"So, Grandma Redding got married again in her sixties."

"Whoa whoa whoa." I pick up the remote and pause the movie. "In the space of ten seconds, we go from me dating to getting remarried?"

Hank sighs. "I'm just trying to make a point, Mom."

"Well, *unmake* it."

"I just think..." He sighs again. "I just think it's time for you to move on, is all."

"Well, thank you for your opinion. Now can we finish the movie?"

Ashley wakes up as the credits are rolling, and we walk together up the stairs toward our respective bedrooms. "You're not going to start going out with other men, are you?" she asks, her brown eyes – Henry's eyes – round and scared.

"Of course not," I say. "I still love your father very much."

Obvious relief glides across her face. "Hank said he was going to talk to you about it."

It bothers me a bit that my children are discussing my love life, but I guess I can't be angry at them for it. "He did, but I'm not interested in anyone else, okay?"

"Okay."

But as I'm lying in bed that night, hugging what used to be my husband's pillow and staring at the ceiling, I wonder if Hank may be right. I'm not ready to date now, of that I have no doubt. But what happens in a few years? What happens when I'm sixty? Seventy? Ninety? Am I prepared to spend the next forty years alone?

The kids are here, though that's not going to last forever. Hank is twenty-six and has his own place; Ashley's fifteen. What will I do when they no longer have time for me?

"I wish you were here," I say aloud. "I miss you so much. Can you hear me, Henry? Do you know how much I love you?" As I finally drift off to sleep, I find myself thinking the one question that I've thought every day, but haven't had the courage to speak aloud.

*Why did you leave me?*

The art class had been Jane's idea. "Just something to keep your mind occupied," she'd said. "To keep from driving yourself crazy." What she wasn't saying was that I was driving *everyone else* crazy, but I went along with it just to shut her up. Now, six weeks in, we've moved on from the color wheel and still lifes and into heavier territory.

"This time," Anne, the instructor, says, "I want you to paint something personal. Today's theme is 'Something I've Lost.' Now, I really want you to think about this before you begin. This piece should actually tell the viewer something about you, something about your soul."

"What, my *Cantaloupe on a Table* wasn't soul-stirring?" quips another student, eliciting a laugh from the rest of the class.

"We're going to spend the rest of the course working on these," Anne continues, "so I want you to really put your best foot forward."

I sit before my blank canvas for the rest of my time there that day, knowing what I want to paint but too cowardly to do it. When the class ends, Mr. Cantaloupe does a double-take as he passes my station. "Painter's block?" he asks. "Or is it that you're lucky enough to have never lost anything?"

I offer him a wan smile. "I don't know where to begin."

"Same here." He nods toward his easel, on the other side of the room. The canvas contains a single diagonal streak of dark brown paint.

"So...you've lost a skid mark?"

His laugh is amazing: full and robust and genuine. When he finally quiets down, there are tears rolling from his eyes, and he wipes them away unabashedly. "Thank you for that," he says. "I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard."

"I can't remember the last time I made someone laugh, so we're even." The old me would've been too shy to tell a joke about dirty underwear to a complete stranger; the new me knows that the worst thing that could ever happen to me already has.

The next week, I'm still contemplating my blank canvas when Mr. Cantaloupe approaches me mid-class. "I haven't introduced myself," he says, offering me his hand. "I'm Jim."

"Lydia."

"Still stuck?"

"Yeah," I say with a sigh.

"Me too. Everything I can think of seems *too* serious for a park district art class."

"No one else seems to be having a problem," I note, seeing the other students working hard on their creations.

"I know. I think I should've signed up for the remedial course. Or maybe I need to dial down the significance of it. I've lost my keys at least once a week since I turned fifty; I think I'll just paint those."

"Good idea. Maybe I'll paint my enthusiasm for this class."

"You're funny," Jim says. "That's getting rarer and rarer these days."

I shrug. Maybe I used to be funny, a long time ago.

"If you have time later, would you like to grab a cup of coffee next door?"

The invitation is startling. Has he been flirting this whole time, and I'm so far out of the game that I haven't noticed? Or is this simply just one student wanting to commiserate with another? Either

way, I'm not sure if I'm ready to be alone with a man who isn't Henry, especially one who has beautiful eyes and a fantastic laugh.

"I can't," I say, doing my best to infuse an apologetic note into my tone as I casually rest my left hand on my paint tray. Jim's cerulean eyes dart to the wedding band on my finger, and the disappointment on his face is unmistakable. "I have to get home."

"Of course," he says. "Maybe some other time."

"Sure."

But we both know that I don't mean it.

I wait until Ashley decides to grace me with her presence before broaching the whole dating subject again. I thought of paying her a visit in her room, but knew that would alarm her more than necessary. This way, I figure, it'll seem casual, like something that just occurred to me on the spot.

"Ash," I begin as she's trying to pick a cereal for breakfast, "would you be bothered if I started dating?"

She steps out of the pantry into the kitchen, looking absolutely horrified. "Why? Are you thinking about it?"

*Well, that answers my question.* "No, I just wondered why you seemed so upset when we talked about it before."

She looks at me as if I just stepped off of a spaceship. "Because if you had a boyfriend, that would be just *awful!*"

"Awful?" I'm a little offended.

"YES! What about Daddy?" She's near tears.

"I love your father," I reassure her. "I'll love him forever."



"And ever, right?" Those damned eyes of hers are pleading with me to agree with her, though that last question only accentuates how immature she still is. I have lingering guilt, though, over how I'd practically abandoned her when Henry left, and so I put her fears to rest.

"And ever."

Jane is incensed. "She's a *child*, Lydia. You can't let her make major decisions about your life."

"Maybe once she's away at college..."

"By the time she's goes away, Henry will have been gone *five years*."

Worded like that, it sounds like an impossibly long time.

Jim and I haven't spoken to each other since I gave him the brush-off. In class, I've watched out of the corner of my eye as he works on his painting, but I don't have the balls to go over and look at it. We've only been exchanging cordial nods and insincere smiles in passing, but a couple of times, I've felt his eyes on me as I work on my own hopeless watercolor. He always lowers his gaze, though, the moment I look up.

The last day of class comes, and it's time for volunteers to share their work. There are quite a few paintings of pets, one of a rag doll from someone's childhood, one of a pile of money ("I have two kids in college," the artist explains). Neither Jim nor I opt to show our work to the other students, and before I know it, Anne is thanking everyone for participating and encouraging us to sign up for the next session. Before I lose my nerve, I make my way to Jim's station as he's packing up his supplies.

"That's some skid mark," I say when I get a look at what's on his easel. It's a landscape, a meadow on a sunny day, simple yet very well-done.

"It's supposed to represent calm and peace," he says.

I understand his message right away, and it gives me the strong urge to wrap my arms around him. "That's what you believe you've lost."

"Yes. I..."

"You what?" I prompt.

"I lost my wife last year. She was waiting for a heart transplant." He gives me a sad, wry smile.

"This class was supposed to take my mind off of things."

"Let me guess: some well-meaning someone bullied you into doing it."

"You're very perceptive, Lydia, and correct. My kids made me do it. This was less a hobby and more adult daycare."

"That sounds familiar."

"What do you mean?"

"Come take a look at my masterpiece."

He looks at my picture – a huge yellow smiley face – for a long time without saying anything.

"Happiness," I explain. "My husband was killed by a drunk driver." It's the first time I've said it without crying.

Realization dawns on Jim's face. "How long?"

"Two years. My sister talked me into this class."

"So I guess we're kind of in the same boat," he concludes.

"Yes," I say, twisting my wedding band around on my finger. "I guess we are."

"Hey," he says, "since we're both feeling sorry for ourselves and will probably never see each other again, would you possibly reconsider joining me for coffee?"

"I would," I reply. My heart is racing, but for once I think it's from anticipation and not fear. "Just let me pack up my stuff."

"Wait one minute. You have a little paint..." He rubs his thumb along my jaw by my ear then holds it up to reveal a streak of goldenrod. As I begin to bag up my pots and brushes, I'm hit by a shocking revelation:

I could fall in love with that thumb.