

Moving On

The calendar on the wall was still on February even though it was two months later. He couldn't bring himself to change it, so it hung on an otherwise bare wall displaying a heart-shaped snowflake and a star on the 14th. Waking up in the cold house on Monday morning, he rolled over to his wife's side of the bed. There was still a slight indent in the mattress where she'd always slept, face down, one arm splayed over the edge. He used to make fun of the way she slept sprawled out like that. She was usually so tidy, her back perfectly straight and her hair twisted up like a cinnamon roll. He eased his legs over the side of the bed, rubbed his stubbled chin and padded quietly through to the kitchen. Mia was already rustling about across the hall and he hurried to make breakfast so she wouldn't be late for school again.

The house had run on a strict schedule before his wife died. He remembered waking every day to her voice.

"Rise and shine, Mia!" she'd shout, and he'd clamp the pillow over his head, burying himself under the comforter she'd bought on sale at Pottery Barn. Blue-and-white striped, it now lay crumpled at the foot of the unmade bed. The entire house had fallen into disrepair. The little ceramic vase on the dining-room table used to have fresh flowers each week, but now held only a few brittle stems. The soft, green couch that she'd loved so much was littered with magazines and dirty clothes. A large stain had appeared on one of the cushions, but after trying to get it out a few times, he'd given up. The kids' rooms were a mess, the milk seemed always to be bad, and the toilet paper supply was dwindling. She would have freaked out, he thought, if she'd seen the house like this and considered tidying up a bit after dropping Mia off at school.

She'd responded pretty well to the death of her mother, and after being quiet for the first few weeks had slowly shifted to her old, hyper self. Children bounced back better than adults, he thought as he cracked the eggs. He wasn't so sure about Theo. He was older, after all, and more aware of the holes in the story about his mom's death. Theo hadn't attended a full week of school since she died. His counselor had called up not long after the funeral.

"Hello, Mr. Bennet. It's Theo's advisor, Charlotte." Her peppy voice had contrasted sharply with the overwhelming sadness he'd felt.

"Hi," he'd said, trying to match her tone.

"I'm calling in reference to the extreme differences in Theo's grades we've been seeing of late." She went on to list his son's high school accomplishments — star basketball player, chess club head, track athlete, yearbook editor— and the shock his teachers felt when his grades dropped.

"Well, Theo's doing fine considering what's happened and—,"

She cut him off, "Theo should talk to me if he feels unhappy. He really needs to keep his grades up if he wants to go to a good college and, as I'm sure you know, Mr. Bennet, college is the first step for..."

He hung up. He didn't need some giddy woman meddling with his family.

He could hear Mia's bouncing steps on the stairs and hurried to finish the eggs, scooping them onto a pink, heart-shaped plate.

"Morning, sweetheart," he said. "How'd you sleep?"

He hadn't had a good night's sleep for a while now. His shrink said he should just ride it out. He'd asked for meds, but Dr. Friedman had insisted the natural way was best for his body, mind, and family.

“You have two kids, Phil, and they’ve experienced more than you can imagine. Do you really want to throw an addict dad to the mix?”

He’d sighed. Dr. Friedman always knew how to phrase questions in a way that made it impossible to answer yes.

A sharp pinch on his forearm startled him out of his reverie.

“Daddy, you’re doing it again.” It was Mia, a slight frown clouding her face.

“Doing what, sweetie?” he said, rubbing his arm.

“Dreaming.” She plopped down at the dining room table. “I had to pinch you.”

She dug into her eggs and toast with all the hunger of a puppy, her miniature fork scraping the plastic plate. He turned back to tend to the dishes and indulged in a slight smile. It felt good, though the muscles in his face were out of practice.

Mia looked so much like her mother. They had the same long chestnut hair, splash of freckles, and rounded cheeks. She was just a smaller version of his wife and he couldn’t help but feel a jolt whenever he looked at her. She smiled up at him now, a fleck of egg caught in the corner of her mouth. He remembered the last time he’d seen his wife smile. She was in the kitchen making dinner, and the whole house smelled spicy and welcoming. He had just come home from work, not having eaten since that morning, and the sight and scent of wife and food had immediately lifted his spirits. He’d walked in to see what she was making and that was when she’d smiled.

It started in her eyes. They’d sparkle mischievously, filled with something more than just happiness. That glow would flow down to her nose, which would crinkle, creating folds and crevices. The light continued down to her mouth, making the edges of her lips turn up. Her dimples would deepen, creating little dents in her cheeks. The whole process took a millisecond.

Mia finished her breakfast and stood, dropping her plate in the sink as she left the kitchen. He glanced at the clock, then rushed upstairs to make himself presentable for the other parents. They’d all been supportive in the first few weeks. Mrs. Johnson from next door had brought hot meals. The Clarks offered to have Mia sleepover at their house while things were being “sorted out.”

“It’s just what neighbors do,” Mrs. Clark had said when he’d thanked her. “If something like this were to happen to one of us we know you’d do the same. And we all loved Lydia.”

There were still stories circulating about how exactly Lydia Bennet had died. Some said it was a car accident. Others argued that was code for suicide. A few said it was probably cancer: everybody and their mother had cancer. He’d shrugged off the stories and quiet inquiries, not confirming or denying anything.

“It’s okay,” Dr. Friedman had said during their last session. “It’s okay to leave it up in the air for a bit. But sooner or later you’re going to have to face the facts.”

He shaved off the stubble and combed his messy hair, then struggled to find clean clothes. After the first few weeks, the neighborhood mothers had stopped offering to do his laundry and make his dinners. They had PA meetings to plan, pies to bake, marriages to save. He and his children were the least of their worries. He finally found a slightly dirty pair of khakis and a sweater and hurried downstairs to get Mia. He ducked into Theo’s room on his way out, but when he was greeted with only a pile of blankets and muffled music he closed the door and hurried on.

The car was cold and he ran the engine for a bit. Mia hummed some nursery rhyme in the backseat, her feet swinging to the beat. He rubbed his hands together trying to keep warm, and

couldn't help but notice the thin, pale strip circling his left finger where the ring had been. His sister-in-law, Maggie, had said Lydia wouldn't have wanted him to keep wearing it.

"You gotta get out there, Philly," she'd said, the big black sunglasses she'd worn to the funeral moving up and down as she spoke. "She'd want you to, you know. Lydy and I always said if something happened we'd want our guys to find another girl." She'd paused to take a big sip from a silver thermos she'd brought instead of a purse. He'd hoped it was coffee, but knew it wasn't.

The car was warm enough now and he began to back out of the gravel driveway. The route to Mia's elementary school was one of his favorites. They'd pass the other neat houses on Kent Street, turn left at the stop sign, and be off down Main Street. It was still early and the only people out were overenthusiastic joggers and homeless schizophrenics. In his rearview mirror, he saw the Johnsons' shiny new Honda pull out and made a mental note to thank them for the flowers they'd sent over.

The card accompanying the bouquet had read: "Our sincerest condolences! Apologies for missing the funeral! We were in Cabo last week! In the words of the Aztec Underworld messenger, 'You ascend into the Light, you leave behind the flowers and the singing and the earth. Safe journey, O friend!' Much love, the Johnson Family." He remembered counting the exclamation points.

They'd reached the school entrance and he offered to walk her in.

"No, thank you, Daddy." She hopped out of the car, purple lunchbox in hand. He watched her run up to meet her friends and go inside, then started the drive back. He hadn't even left the block when he glimpsed a waving figure and pulled over.

It was Kristen Field. Blonde, tall, and aging almost naturally, she was the hottest mom at parent meetings. Her son, Sebastian, was one of Mia's best friends and she'd always been close with Lydia. He remembered coming home one Friday afternoon to find them together on the back porch, splitting a bottle of Chardonnay and chatting about motherhood.

"Hey, Phil. How've you been?" She smiled at him expectantly. He'd been pretty quiet since Lydia died. Ducking in and out of the elementary school, staying briefly at Mia's dance recital, he'd been avoiding encounters of this sort for much longer than he should.

"Fine," he said curtly, "Still adapting and everything."

This was far from true, he thought. Dr. Friedman's pamphlet 'Friedman's Way: Losing a Loved One' outlined the stages of grief and he was still in the throes of 'Step One: Accepting the Truth.' He couldn't bear to think about why or how his wife had died.

"Oh, that's so good to hear." Kristen was still leaning in through the window. "We've all been so worried! You seemed a bit, well, shy at the last meeting." Her sweater was low-cut and he couldn't help but glance down.

"Yeah, well." He turned his eyes back to the road. "We're getting there."

"Listen, Phil, if you need anything at all feel free to call me." She was trying to get his attention, bending over even lower and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He kept his eyes glued to the steering wheel.

"Thanks, Kristen," he muttered.

Lydia hadn't ever been possessive. She'd never said anything when he glanced at other women and he, likewise, had stayed quiet when she lingered with the pizza delivery-man or Mr. Stevenson, the dashing second grade substitute teacher. Maybe what Maggie had said after the funeral was true, he thought as he drove off. Maybe he should find someone new.

Dr. Friedman had mentioned this option. “Phil, have you considered what your love life will look like, moving on?” he’d asked.

This seemed much too cold. It was too soon to look beyond Lydia. He’d never get used to waking up alone or making breakfast in the silent kitchen. And yet he didn’t need a shrink to tell him he had to think ahead.

He pulled into the driveway and sat there for a moment. Lydia had been everything to him since they’d met back at college. She was his opposite and, as he’d learned in Advanced Chemistry, opposites attract. He’d gravitated toward her neatness, her precision, and beauty. He’d wooed her through his cute disheveled-ness and eclectic music taste. They were voted Best Couple by their classmates. She’d been so much a part of his life that he could barely tell where she ended and he began.

He reached into the passenger-side cup-holder. Among crumbs and stickiness, he found the ring. He’d placed it there after the funeral at Maggie’s command. She’d offered to drive after he threw up at the cemetery after the service. It became apparent, however, that she’d clearly had one swig too many from her thermos. She’d ignored every speed limit sign, sticking to a steady 87 mph. The windows had been wide open, and the wind felt new and fresh. He’d glanced at Theo and Mia in the backseat. Mia was fast asleep, her cheek resting against the window, and Theo just stared straight ahead. He wanted to know what they were thinking, but didn’t know how to ask.

“Take it off,” Maggie had shouted over the wind, “Take the fucking ring off.”

He’d watched a single tear fall from behind her dark sunglasses. He remembered reluctantly sliding the band off. It glowed in the afternoon sun. He’d looked down at the small disk that had held his heart for the past twenty years and placing it carefully into the cup-holder.

Now he held it in his palm. He felt an overwhelming urge to cry, but nothing came. He started the engine again and backed out of the driveway. Barely pausing at the stop sign, he turned right and put his foot down on the accelerator. He passed the local high school where teenagers mingled awkwardly on the lawn. The shops on Hill Street were just opening, and he glimpsed overeager young mothers hurrying to buy the day’s necessities. The town became a blur as he rushed over the railroad tracks, out into the country. He drove with both front windows open, the wind ruffling his carefully-combed hair. The breeze cooled the car rapidly and goose-bumps formed on his arms, a product of chilly air and speed. He drove until he reached a deserted stretch of road about twenty miles out of town. It was surrounded by fields topped in a short green fringe. He accelerated again, till the speedometer’s needle graced ninety then extended his arm out the window, palm up. The ring glistened there in the morning light for a moment and he held his breath as he flung it as hard as he could. He lost sight of it in the wind.