

When I got the call I wasn't sad. To be honest, I was surprised that it hadn't happened sooner.

"Yes?" I answered, voice steady and expectant. She had killed herself on a Wednesday, but they didn't find her body until Friday because she lived alone. The police report was vague. After I hung up the phone I sat down at my small round kitchen table.

Now it felt the same as the night I found out. Darkness stretched ahead of the evening, heavy and interminable. My mother sat exactly five inches away from me on the couch. Neither one of us spoke. "For the technical challenge," the TV host chirped, "you'll be making kouign-amann." The only other sound was the faint hum of the electricity running through my mother's house. I glanced briefly at her profile. Her eyes were steeled on the TV; her head held perfectly straight. There was not even a twitch of her lips, only the periodic blink of her eyelids.

"Would you like me to turn on a light?"

She shook her head wordlessly, lips pressed together, eyes never wavering from the screen. Five pecans sat like dead cockroaches within the small glass bowl on the rectangular mahogany coffee table. Her fingers snaked slowly forward towards the nuts as if of their own accord. They grasped, then brought one to her mouth, though her head did not move. I heard the pecan disintegrating slowly and rhythmically under her teeth. Then she was still.

I always wondered how I would react. There was no wailing or falling to the floor. I had begun to shiver, like when I was nine and had my first panic attack. No matter how many times it happened it felt both familiar and foreign. But in that moment, it was comforting to feel as though my body was possessed, as though my agency had been stripped away. For once I didn't need to be in control.

The next morning I went down to the living room.

“I have the pleasure of delivering the happy news: our star baker this week is...James!” Onscreen, James put his face in his hands as he smiled, red self-consciousness tinging his cheeks. My sister’s face would do the same thing when someone complimented her.

My mother had fallen asleep on the couch, in the same seated position as before. The only difference was that her spine rested against the back of the couch instead of standing straight on its own. Her head was tipped back slightly, hands clasped together in the center of her lap. The other bakers clustered around James, congratulating him with teary eyes and warm embraces.

I looked away from the TV and back toward my mother. I didn’t know what to do. Many years ago, probably around the same time I had my first panic attack, my mom stood in front of me in the kitchen with her lips in a thin line and her arms crossed over her chest.

“What do you mean you don’t know what you should be doing?” she said in an accusatory tone. “When I was your age I could cook an entire Thanksgiving meal by myself. There’s work to be done; go wash up.”

I walked to the sink, on my tiptoes so that the floor wouldn’t creak and startle her. The sink water ran hot over my hands, scalding me just enough to turn my fragile skin bright red. I didn’t turn it off, though.

After a beat I heard her reedy voice. “Why would you run the hot water like that?”

I stood there, my cheeks turning as red as my hands. I knew I should turn the water off but something in my diaphragm kept my eyes trained on the faucet and my arms by my side. I felt her walk to stand next to me. My head came just to her elbow. She was a very tall woman. “Go to your room. I’ll do it myself.” I turned and walked wordlessly up the stairs into the bedroom I shared with my sister.

Once again I stood frozen, the feeling in my stomach keeping me glued to my spot in the living room's entryway. She looked so fragile, so tender. All at once I noticed how her hair was more salt than pepper, how her skin creased into leathery folds near her eyes and mouth, how dark purple bruises had begun to paint her hands like her mother before her. I wanted to go to her and hold her. She would die soon too, her life held together with the hope of maybe one day seeing her daughters happier than her.

My dad flew in that afternoon. I don't think he was surprised, either.

"Hey, kiddo," he greeted me at the airport. I stood there in front of him with my hands at my sides. Neither of them touched me as a child, not even to give me a kiss goodnight. They didn't know how to, but I couldn't blame them because their parents didn't either. They started saying *I love you* after the first time, when she was sixteen and they found her next to the knife block in the kitchen. We moved houses after that but they never learned how to say *I'm sorry*.

The car ride to my mother's house was nearly silent, like every other ride before this one. My parents never listened to music. I didn't even know that people drove with music on until I went to college.

"How's the master's program?" We were seven minutes into the forty-minute journey.

"It's good."

The only difference was that now I was in the driver's seat. Even when I came home during undergrad, my dad insisted on driving me to and from the airport. I waited exactly thirteen more minutes to break the silence.

"How are you?" I asked. I couldn't bring myself to be more specific.

"I'm fine," he answered. "Thanks for asking."

We didn't speak for the rest of the drive.

It was five-thirty by the time we arrived at the house. As I pushed the door gently open, my eyes struggled to adjust to the dim haze. I walked through the hallway to stand in the living room entryway, this time with my father at my side. The TV was still on, despite the volume being far too low to understand without subtitles. James and his compatriots had been replaced by a dozen new bakers.

“Mom?” I said gently.

She turned her head over her shoulder, exactly ninety degrees to the left of where it was before. This was the first time we had made eye contact since Friday.

“Have you had the TV on all day?”

She shook her head. “I turned it off for a while but it got too quiet.”

I nodded. “Dad’s here,” I said lamely. I didn’t really have anything else to say. He looked down and then quickly up, shifting his weight from his left foot to his right. He cleared his throat and looked all over the room except at my mother.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.” He hadn’t visited since my mother first moved in.

She didn’t respond. I felt like I was sprinting through my own brain, searching for a sentence, a word, anything that could break the tension. But nothing came, and I stood there, paralyzed. I didn’t know what to do, so I started digging into the ragged cuticle of my right thumb with my right index finger. This was a habit I had picked up in childhood. I initially found it very disturbing because I hated going too far and feeling pain bloom under my nail, seeing blood ooze from the cracks of my skin. Now, however, it didn’t bring me any relief until I felt the sharp sting of red raw skin.

By the time I was finished with my hangnail, my dad was sitting in the overstuffed green armchair across the living room. He got it as a gift for my mother when she was pregnant with my sister, but I doubted that he was thinking about that now. I was thinking

about who was going to make dinner. When we were all still together, my dad would start making dinner at five-thirty sharp so that it would be ready when my sister got back from practice at six-thirty. But my dad didn't live here anymore.

“What do you want for dinner?” I tentatively asked. No one replied. “Should I order pizza?”

My mom shook her head. “I don't like pizza.” From his perch, my dad rolled his eyes but stayed silent. I could feel the blood rushing to my face, so I busied myself with staring at my feet. One would think that humans could not sit in complete silence and avoid eye contact for fifteen minutes without moving a single muscle. Then again, they had never met my parents.

“I'm going to go make something, then,” I said, mostly just so I could get out of the room. I walked to the kitchen and opened the pantry. I hated cooking, but my sister had loved it since our childhood. As she got older, she got more and more into it, and she started to make her own pasta from scratch. She would come over to my mother's house every Sunday and blast her favorite playlist from her phone, whisking the eggs in a nest of semolina flour. By the time she was done, flour covered the counter. I didn't come over every week, but I tried to be there at least one Sunday a month. She would pull me in, offering me the whisk with a grin on her face as her hair loosened from its messy bun. I would roll my eyes and refuse, but somehow I always ended up helping to knead it once the eggs and flour were all incorporated. The part I truly enjoyed was wielding the rolling pin. It was the least messy part, and I knew exactly what to do. Even our mom would laugh sometimes when she saw her two grown daughters bickering over who got to roll out the dough.

Now I stared into the dark abyss of the pantry. I hadn't bothered to turn the light on when I entered the kitchen, and the rapidly setting sun was taking the blood-red rays of late afternoon with it. My mother hadn't gone grocery shopping in at least a week. A bag of

pecans, two boxes of store-brand penne pasta, and a half-empty bag of semolina flour sat sorrowfully on the shelf. I sighed, picked one of the pasta boxes at random, and set it on the counter. I might not have been able to make a Thanksgiving dinner but I could make pasta. I dug in the cabinets underneath the counter, looking for a pot to boil water. Whenever the steel pots clanged together loudly, I winced and paused, waiting for my mother to start yelling. Today, however, there was silence.

Once I found the pasta pot, I filled it nearly to the brim. I put a pinch of salt in and set it on the stove. The first cooking lesson I learned was that a watched pot never boils. The second was to throw salt over your left shoulder if you spilled any. Every time I used salt, I was careful not to spill it. But just in case, I would throw some over my shoulder anyway. That's what my mother would do. So I did it again now, because maybe we hadn't done it enough in the past. Maybe some grains had fallen onto the floor, unnoticed, and maybe that was why my sister was dead.

"Can I help?" My dad stood awkwardly in the kitchen doorway, much like I had in the living room.

I shook my head. "I just put the water on to boil."

There was nothing he could do now, nothing any of us could do but wait. I knew that it would not boil unless I turned away. I walked to stand in front of the sink and turned the faucet on, running my hands under the water. It should have been too hot to bear, but I barely registered the sensation. I did not look at my hands; instead, I gazed at the decaying wooden swingset in my mother's backyard. It was the only relic she kept when she moved into the house. In the faint reflection of the window, I could see my dad's face behind me. My dad stared at the swingset without blinking, or maybe he was staring at me.