Approx. 3,450 words

The Small Grave Between Them

"No more rain, Julie. Isn't that great?" her mother asked absently, as she was washing dishes. "What are your plans for the day?"

Julie shrugged and moved her spoon around in the cereal bowl. Today was Friday, and it had been raining steadily for almost a week. Their quiet neighborhood on the Southeast shore of Brooklyn, bounded by the salt marshes of Jamaica Bay, had grown oppressively waterlogged and steamy. In the beginning of her 12th summer, Julie sensed that the entire house was underwater and that she, her mother, and her father were all waiting their turns to drown.

She'd spent much of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday flat on her back, sprawled across the blue shag carpet, next to the window. She watched the water drip off the side of the window frame and into the bushes below. Every so often the gutters above filled, and rainwater fell from the roof in a rapid, wet clatter. In the afternoons, she sometimes carried a book into her bedroom, or into the corner behind the mauve armchair in the living room to read in semi-seclusion. The living room was better; she could observe her father's care from a position of relative safety, almost as though she were watching a television program. Her need to watch, as though her presence might somehow affect the inevitable outcome, was in direct opposition to her nearly constant urges to flee and to disappear.

The sounds of her mother's usual activities – the slam of the car door, the opening and closing of the refrigerator as she made meals for Julie and her father, the rumbling of the washing machine – had largely ceased after Julie's Dad had returned home from the hospital. All

activity in the house had faded and narrowed until it seemed to virtually disappear that summer, and her father's slow death seemed to be the only thing happening, anywhere.

Earlier in June when Julie's Dad had first come home from the hospital, they had moved him into the spare bedroom on the first floor. This made it easier for the hospice nurses to wheel equipment in and out. On those rainy, early summer days, time was punctuated by minor events like the changing shifts of nurses and aides. Only the sounds of machines, the television in the spare bedroom and Julie's mother, shuffling between the kitchen and bedroom to retrieve ice chips, had disrupted the silence of those rainy days. Julie listened from her corner of the living room to the rasp of her mother's feet as they advanced and retreated; the floorboards in the bedroom groaned, the carpet in the hallway whispered. Maybe her mother was so exhausted that it didn't seem worth the effort to lift her feet as she walked, only to have to put them back down on the earth. Then there was sound of sputtering and coughing as sucked his ice chips. Silence was restored.

Earlier that week, on Tuesday, the doctor came with his grey hair and warm brown eyes that matched his leather bag. He spoke with Julie's mother in soft, even tones, his voice both empathetic and resigned. When the nurse came later, she chattered cheerfully as she pushed beige liquid through the feeding tube that ran from her father's nose into his stomach. Julie watched through the open door, from the sanctuary of the couch.

It had been Wednesday when he began refusing the ice chips. The nurse arrived early, and Julie overheard the shrill, pleading voice of her mother and her father's hoarse protests. Her mother crossed the living room in a hush. She heard the shuffling continue through the kitchen to the basement door, where there was a pause. The door, which had for years contained the washer and dryer and held back the horrors of the dark, was opened. She heard her mother's feet in their

blue slippers, descending to the rough tile below. There was a metallic squelch and the grinding of metal on concrete as her mother sat down in an old lawn chair, and then another long hour of silence.

Thursday had been marked by the arrival of her mother's friend, Mrs. Longo, who picked Julie up and brought her back to their house. "Maureen is waiting for you downstairs," she said, closing the screen door and putting her keys down on the counter. Maureen was her best friend by default, since their mothers were close and spent so much time together. They mostly went swimming in good weather, or played board games in the Longo's finished basement. The girls had never spoken about Julie's father, but had heard her mother crying to Mrs. Longo above them in their kitchen back in May, when he was still inpatient at a Cancer Center in Manhattan. Maureen had turned the volume up on the TV so they could continue with their Monopoly game.

On Thursday, Maureen did not want to play board games and instead told Julie that they were going to play "make-over." Julie would be the hairdresser and makeup artist, and Maureen was going to her senior prom. Mrs. Longo was a hairdresser turned real estate agent, and had an arsenal of makeup, hairbrushes, curlers, and bobby pins stored in the basement. Julie devised a lopsided hairstyle with elaborately feathered bangs, and Maureen's mother brought them each a bologna and cheese sandwich and RC Cola in red plastic cups. Maureen asked for a straw so that she would not ruin her lipstick. They ate, surrounded by hairspray fumes and the hum of the fluorescent lights. A fly strip waved back and forth, stirred by the inorganic breeze of the air conditioner.

There was no place Julie felt comfortable being for long periods of time, because she often had the nagging feeling that she should be at home, observing her father from a safe distance. It sometimes felt as though she were trapped in a revolving door. "I'm going to go

home now," Julie told Maureen's mother, who was sitting in the kitchen, smoking and watching Bob Barker congratulate a jubilant schoolteacher from the Midwest who had just won a Hawaiian vacation. "Oh, Julie, do you want a ride? It looks like it's going to rain again any second." Julie noticed a small scuff in the leather of her white sandals. There was blood on her big toe from where she had stubbed it earlier on a concrete step, but she hadn't noticed that she was hurt.

"No, that's OK, I can walk," Julie told her.

"How are you doing, honey?"

"Fine," Julie answered, still looking down at her toe. Mrs. Longo didn't notice the dark red, crusty blood that had dried there.

"Well, make sure you take care of your mom, she's really going through a lot."

"OK," Julie answered. "Thanks for lunch."

Maureen's mother watched her as she banged through the screen door, and walked around the house onto the sidewalk. She made the sign of the cross, stood up, and went to Maureen's room to gather laundry for the wash.

Finally, on Friday, in a mundane miracle, the clouds had parted and the rain had stopped. Her mother had finished with the breakfast dishes and had gone in to keep her father company. The guest bed had been moved out of the spare bedroom, and replaced by a hospital bed with guardrails. Julie pushed the door open, and heard her father moan softly. Her mother was adjusting the TV antennae, and looked up. "Do you want to watch some TV with us?"

"No, that's OK," Julie said. As Julie spoke, her head and left arm were in the room while the rest of her body was set in concrete on the other side of the door. The threshold seemed impenetrable to Julie ever since her father had become confused, stopped talking and began

making sounds of distress. Low, wet, gurgling. Animal sounds, and the beep of the heart monitor. In past summers, Julie had spent much of her time on her father's small boat, exploring Jamaica Bay and learning to fish. By early May of this year, he had already pulled himself tightly inside like a turtle they had found once at the marina. She experienced her father's retreat, an absence despite his physical presence, as a cut that closed but would not heal. He had come home to die, and Julie spent every night of that spring and summer laying awake, terrified and guilty over her inability to feel anything for him other than impatience.

"Are you going out?" her mother asked, concentrating intensely on the television, her blue eyes milky and blank.

"Yeah, I think so. For a little while."

"Don't go far, OK? Stay in the backyard, or at least on the block."

"OK," Julie said. She not told her mother where she went or how she spent her time recently, and her mother had rarely asked. It was 11am, which meant a rerun of *Who's the Boss* and several hours of soap operas were ahead. Julie closed the door quietly.

Outside, the air was heavy and thick, like terry cloth. She had walked around the block twice before deciding to disobey her mother and visit the marshy area sheltered in reeds at the edge of the neighborhood. Crossing through one neighbor's yard and into the next, she walked across patches of green and flagstone. She crossed Avenue V and found the path where tall weeds had been repeatedly pressed down by tires and feet, forming a mottled green carpet. Julie followed it to the place where cars had been stripped and abandoned. There were a number of obscure treasures to be found here. On the few occasions Julie had explored the area, she had seen older kids scavenging for car parts, resting their sweaty beer cans on the rusted frames. Today, the woods were damp, silent and mercifully empty. The steel-belted radials and wood

planks embedded in the mud formed a makeshift road, leading deeper into the woods to a small clearing.

The path that had been worn into the underbrush faded beneath the trees, and was replaced by damp earth, smelling sweetly of decay. Julie paused, catching sight of something red and metallic in the bushes. A bike leaned, its handlebars hooked over the limb of an unruly yellow forsythia bush. Next to it a boy squatted, observing something carefully on the ground. The something was moving. The boy's sandy hair was short and straight, and she could see that his neck was pink from sun just above the collar of his t-shirt. He was coiled tightly around himself, his arms linked around his legs, chin resting on his knees. His head turned slightly to the right as he heard a twig snap beneath Julie's sneaker, and went rigid for a moment, observing her through his peripheral vision. Then he turned, and said softly to the ground, "I found a bird." She thought she had seen him in the neighborhood, but he was one of the Catholic school kids. Julie had been going to Catholic Education classes for years, held during after school hours in the classrooms at St. Mary's, the small school that was attached to the church. *Maybe I sat at his desk during CCD and didn't know it,* she thought.

She approached boy and bird slowly. "Did it fall from a nest?" she asked.

"I don't think so. It's an adult, not a baby. You can tell by their color. Also, it's a gull, they don't nest here."

The bird twisted on the ground, its neck flopping uselessly at its side. It beat its lopsided wings first frantically, then half-heartedly, then frantically again, as if it could not decide whether to give up or to continue its tenuous resistance. They watched it for several moments, in silence. "I don't think we can help it. See how its neck is broken? I think the left wing is broken, too, and there's something wrong with its legs. Maybe a crash landing or it hit a tree," the boy

said. His eyes did not make contact with hers, but she noticed that they were warm and brown, beneath thick lashes. His chin was down-turned, held tight against his throat, his shoulders hunched and narrowed.

"What should we do?" Julie asked.

"If we leave it here, it could die in a few hours, but it could be a day or two. It might starve and suffer. I think we have to put it out of its misery," the boy answered. He did not look up.

"OK," Julie said. She began scanning the area for something she could use to kill the bird. She saw a plastic bag, a few medium-sized rocks, but nothing that seemed appropriately deadly. The gull had grown tired, its chest pounding with the effort. It lay on the ground, panting and slowly flapping its right wing, covered in mud. Julie and the boy walked the perimeter of the undergrowth, and after a few minutes Julie called to him, "Here, I have something." She pulled an old, faded orange chair from the bushes, clearing wet leaves and a vine from its frame. The chair was made from molded plastic, and had two metal runners that formed the front and back legs. The seat had a wide crack through its center, and appeared melted in several places.

"What are we going to do with that?" The boy asked. He peered thoughtfully at the broken chair. "We could use the bottom part, the runner, and put it over her throat." he said. "It should be pretty quick."

"Yeah," said Julie, speaking around the lump forming in her throat. The boy looked up then, and she saw some familiar thing cross him. It was neither an expression nor a shadow that passed over his face, but some minuscule change instantly recognizable to Julie. It represented both a relinquishing of hope, and the acceptance of a fresh burden. Their eyes met, and he extended his arm quickly towards her.

“I’ll do it. It’s OK,” Julie said, clutching the chair tightly. The bird opened and closed its beak, and resumed its lopsided dance against the dirt.

“No. You shouldn’t have to do it. I found it,” the boy replied. His chest was rising and falling quickly, as though he were short of breath. His eyes broke away from hers, fluttering back toward the ground. A small vein in his neck stood out as she handed him the chair, and he lifted it the several feet to where the bird lay struggling, thrashing, beating the earth for its transgressions.

He considered the runners on the bottom of the chair carefully, and bent over to examine the bird a final time, as though confirming his initial diagnosis. He looked at Julie, and his face softened. “You should go now.”

“No, I’ll help you bury him.”

“She's female,” he replied, thoughtfully. “See how small she is? The females are a lot smaller than the males.”

“I’ll help you bury her,” Julie corrected. He nodded, and turned his attention back to the bird. The boy placed the front runner of the chair across the bird’s slender neck. He hesitated for a second, and then in a swift movement, pressed down on the front of the chair and sat on the cracked seat. The bird struggled and thrashed for several seconds, its legs and wings splayed inarticulately behind it. Its movements began to slow and become languid, as though some unseen hand had stroked it into submission and sleep. He studied some detail on his sneaker as he concentrated, maintaining pressure on the front of the chair. Julie realized she had been holding her breath as the bird finally ceased all movement, becoming as silent and still as the damp leaves beneath its body.

Julie searched through scrap metal and glass littered a few yards away to find a small, flat piece of aluminum they could use to dig a hole. She crouched down next to the base of a birch tree, and began to dig in the soft earth. She carefully extracted small rocks from the soil, and she and the boy made a hole one foot wide and two feet deep. The boy lifted the poor, misshapen bird, carrying her to the tiny, open grave. He placed her carefully in the hole, laying her neck straight, and bending her wings back against her soft, white sides. Julie noticed the relative smallness and stillness of the animal, and saw that the boy, too, seemed diminished. It was as though the vacuum of death had drained their own matter of its substance, shrinking the existence of those who remained to bear witness.

"Should we say something? Like, something about her life? A prayer?" The boy studied her face for a reaction. Julie's eyes were blue and slightly wet, the tears appeared to originate from a deep, underground stream.

"Birds don't have religion," she said, wiping sweat and tears from her face with the neck of her t-shirt. "They die all the time and no one gives them funerals."

The two crouched over the gull's grave, and began to fill it in with their hands. Julie wiped moisture from her forehead with the back of her hand, smearing dirt across her face. "This isn't really deep enough," the boy said, as he observed the bird's slow disappearance beneath layers of leaves and loose soil.

"No, it's not, but it's OK. Some bigger animal will probably come and eat her," Julie assured him. "It just seems right to bury her, I guess."

The two finished filling in the hole, and patted the earth flat with their hands. Julie sat back, unconcerned with the threat of dirt or grass stains, happy for the cool press of earth against

her body. The boy drew one knee up and looped his arm around it, resting the side of his face against his leg. They rested, relaxing into mossy silence.

Julie noticed the boy's shoelace was untied, and bent to tie it for him, picking at a knot that had formed. She scratched her nose. He said, "Can I ask you a question? Why does your nose always itch when you're trying to untie a knot?"

"Me? My nose?" Julie asked.

"No, I mean, everyone's nose. That happens to me all the time."

Julie thought. "Maybe it's because you're trying to concentrate on something, and it's almost like you're distracting yourself. Like your brain is trying to keep you from something," she answered.

"Yeah, maybe," the boy said. He looked down at the small grave between them. "My grandmother just died. She lived with us," he whispered softly, to the grave, or to Julie.

"My father has cancer," Julie told him. It was the first time she had had to say those words to anyone, because all the people around her seemed to know; friends at school and their parents, her teacher, neighbors. They all knew. He looked up at her sideways and smiled shyly. Julie grasped the boy's damp left hand, the hand that had laid the bird's neck straight before her burial. They both shifted, almost imperceptibly. Their moist fingers interlaced, and then came to rest in one another's palms. He coughed, and then began to rise slowly. "I have to go home, and so do you." The sun was beginning to set, and Julie could see above the trees in the clearing that the sky was pink and orange and purple.

The boy picked his bike up, and wheeled it slowly beside him as they walked back across the damp ground. He rolled it over the rotted planks, to the path of felled cattails. "I'm going this way," he said.

"OK," said Julie. She turned and stepped off the curb into the street.

"Be careful," he called to her. He looked, for a second, as though he had more to say, but instead he cast his eyes down, picking absently at some loose tape on his handlebars.

"I will. You too." She turned and smiled over her shoulder, catching his eyes briefly as he hopped onto the seat and began, slowly, to pedal away. Julie watched him pause at the corner and then turn right, disappearing from view. She wiped her muddy hands on her shorts and became aware of the texture of the ground beneath her wet sneakers, swollen from the long rain but still sound and substantial. Julie walked home slowly, drawing air deeply into her lungs and knowing that on Saturday, it would rain again.