

Red-Eye

The tension in my neck won't go away. My travel pillow isn't helping, so I toss it aside onto the empty seat next to me. The plane is only about half-full, since Delta had been unable to fill a red-eye flight departing at 1:30 a.m. on a Wednesday. There are a few businesspeople, mostly men but a few women, dressed in power suits and pounding the keys of their netbooks. I have mine in my carry-on, but I know I'm not going to get any work done.

I check my watch, more out of restlessness than an actual desire to know the time. It's 3 a.m. Only three more hours of being in the air, and then the plane will touch down in Detroit Metro. After that, I'll have to start dealing with this.

I was about to turn on the tap to start brushing my teeth when my phone lit up and chirped at me. Who would be calling so late? I walked out of the bathroom and retrieved my phone from my nightstand next to my bed. When I saw who it was, I answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Carly."

"Hey, Mom. What's up?"

She cleared her throat. "I got some news today," she said. "I thought you should know."

She had an odd edge to her voice that I hadn't heard before.

"What's going on?" I prompted her.

She sighed. "I don't know how to put this, but... Patrick died two days ago."

I was silent. My stomach began to ache. I couldn't tell if it was a manifestation of grief, or just the bad Chinese food I'd eaten for dinner.

"Carolyn? Are you still there?"

"I'm here."

I slide my hand into the right pocket of my jeans and feel the folded envelope inside it. I haven't been able to bring myself to read the piece of paper it contains. Even when I printed it off the Midland Daily News obituary section before I went to the airport, I just put it inside an envelope without looking at it. If I read it, it will become real, a part of me.

I won't read it until the plane lands.

I begin to sweat, feeling drops of moisture collecting on my forehead. I feel warm, and I take off my hooded sweatshirt. Is the thermostat malfunctioning? Perhaps something more sinister is wrong with the plane, causing the cabin to heat up? I fan myself with my T-shirt, thankful that there's not another passenger next to me to contribute more body heat to my hot flash. Every piece of my clothing is stifling me.

My pocket is the source of the heat. Each letter on that piece of paper presses into my flesh, branding me. Maybe if I don't read it, the ink will bleed and tattoo the words onto my skin, so I will be forced to read them for the rest of my life.

I turn on the passenger fans and aim them toward me, determined not to succumb to what feels like the beginning of a panic attack. When the flight attendant walks by, I ask her for a cup of ice water. I breathe in and out, counting to 5 on each inhale and exhale like my doctor told me to.

I sip my water and concentrate on my breathing as the heat wave finally abates. The envelope in my pocket is a source of calm now, anchoring me to my seat. I already know at a basic level what it says; why not? Gathering my nerve, I reach into my pocket again and pull out the envelope. I hadn't bothered to seal it, so I lift the flap and remove the folded square of paper. Unfolding it and smoothing the wrinkles, I begin to read.

Patrick Robert Kelly

September 3, 1952 – October 7, 2012

Patrick Kelly, age 60, of Midland, Mich., passed away Sunday, October 7, 2012, at MidMichigan Medical Center-Midland, with his family by his side.

The names, dates, and survivors blur as my eyes lose focus. My head throbs, foretelling a migraine. I'm not afraid of this piece of paper anymore, but it's still a lot to take in. I blink a few times, and resume reading toward the bottom of the page.

A visitation will be held Wednesday, October 10, from 5 to 7 p.m. at Wilson Miller Funeral Home, 4210 N. Saginaw Rd. A memorial service will be held Thursday, October 11 at the funeral home, from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., with a burial service following at Midland Cemetery, 3220 Orchard Drive, from 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

My eyes are drawn to my name in the middle of the page. Patrick Kelly was my father, and now he's dead. I wonder if my mother will attend the funeral, but I don't think she will.

"You shouldn't feel obligated to go to that man's funeral, Carly," Mom began, breaking the silence between us. "He's been out of your life for a long time now...I just thought you should know."

"Thanks for telling me," I replied. I paced the floor, traveling in the same circle over and over again. "I don't know...I just feel like I need to do something."

"You don't owe him anything, Carolyn," Mom said, her voice rising in volume. "He was never there for you. When I told him I was pregnant with you, he didn't even want you." She paused again. "Not to be harsh, but...just think about it. He might be your father by blood, but your real father is the one that raised you. He's the one who's been there when Patrick wasn't."

"I know, but—"

"They'll have the funeral for him on Thursday, and it'll be done," Mom interrupted. "He'll be laid to rest and you can go on with your life."

I wished it could be that simple. "I'll see if I can catch a flight. I'll try to be there in the morning."

I could hear my mom's surprise. "But you'll be missing work---"

"My company allows leave for family emergencies," I cut her off, more abruptly than I intended. "I'll be fine." Mom was silent for a moment.

"I at least want to go pay my respects," I said. "I do owe him that much."

"If that's what you want..."

"It is, Mom," I said. "I'll see you later." I hung up, exhausted by the conversation.

My mom's words echo through my mind, unwelcome visitors that don't know when to leave. Death physically tied the loose end that Patrick was for me. Yet, despite what my mom said, I still feel a nagging need to see it for myself.

I do have a father, in the most important sense of the word. After my mom's divorce from Patrick, she dated another man, Aaron. As their relationship grew more serious, my mom introduced him to me. Mom's told me stories about when I met Aaron, how he played with me in the park. She told me about how I first called him by his name, then "Daddy-Aaron," and finally just Dad. After Aaron and Mom got married, that's what he became to me. He did all the things a father does for a daughter: he taught me how to ride a bike, he read stories to me before bedtime. He took me in and loved me as his own child.

It wasn't until a couple years later, when I was about five years old, that things became more confusing. Patrick took my mom to court to get visitation rights for me, and the court ruled that I had to visit him. Thinking about those times is still difficult. When I remember all the fights, lies, tears, and emotional blackmail I went through growing up, I remember why I decided at age thirteen to never see or talk to Patrick or anyone from his side of the family ever again. I wrote Patrick a letter explaining all this, and I haven't seen or heard from him in fourteen years. My mom told him that if he ever wanted to see me again, he could take her to court, but that never happened.

Shifting in my seat, I rub my temples. It's been a long time since I've delved into any of these memories. I try to distract myself, cracking open the novel I brought, but the characters are idiots and the action is uninteresting and predictable. After two chapters, I put it down. I grab a pen out of my bag and try to solve some Sudoku puzzles, but I can't concentrate long

enough to focus on the sequences of numbers. My fellow passengers also prove to be boring. Most of them are asleep, but two men are still awake, steadily typing. I lean back in my seat and close my eyes, hoping my brain will let me relax enough to sleep for a couple of hours.

A voice over the intercom wakes me up, announcing that we will be landing in Detroit Metro soon. It instructs everyone to fold up their trays, stow their bags beneath their seats, and fasten their seatbelts. I reach into my bag and take out a piece of gum before placing the bag under my seat. I watch as other passengers wake up and prepare for landing. After a few minutes, the voice tells us to prepare for descent, and I feel myself being pressed back into my seat. I begin chewing my gum in hopes that my ears won't hurt as much from the pressure.

I look out the window as we continue downward. The lights of the city stand out like beacons in the darkness. I wish I could feel welcomed by their warm yellow glow. My stomach twists as I am reminded of why I'm landing here in Michigan this morning.

Across the aisle from me, a man comforts a little girl who looks to be about four years old. She presses her disheveled, mouse-brown curls into his chest as he wraps his arm around her.

"It'll be okay, hun," he murmurs.

I wait for a few minutes until I am able to exit. Rising from my seat, I collect my bag and walk down the aisle. In the midst of the small group of passengers, I walk out of the plane and down the hallway that leads to the terminal.

Once I enter, I quickly walk to the rental car counter. The clerk checks my ID and processes my rental agreement with a few keystrokes on her computer. She runs my credit card and prints the contract. After I sign it, she hands me my keys, informing me that my vehicle is parked in space 17.

I don't even remember what type of vehicle I rented as I walk out into the parking lot. The lights of the airport reflect back at me from the surface of the wet asphalt. I hit the button on my key fob and headlights flash at me. I unlock the car and open the door. It still has the new-car smell. I enter my hotel's address into my GPS, and back out of the parking space.

The raindrops glisten on my windshield as I drive. I almost feel bad about turning on my wipers. The radio is tuned in to a country station, playing some sappy song. When I realize the lyrics are about fathers and daughters, I turn it off.

The cheerful voice of my GPS directs me to turn right into the hotel parking lot. I park my car and walk inside. The receptionist frowns at me.

"Are you checking in?"

"I can't think of another reason why I'd be here at 6:30 in the morning," I reply.

She blushes and hands me my key. "You'll be upstairs in room 208. Take the elevator, and it's right on the left."

I follow her directions and enter my room. It's small, but it looks comfortable enough. After locking and chaining the door and drawing the curtains, I toss my bag on the floor and begin taking off my clothes. I inspect the bathroom, but it looks spotless, so I get in the shower. The hot water soothes my tense muscles.

I step out of the shower and wipe the fogged-up mirror with a towel. I see my pale face looking back at me, with a small, pointed chin, a medium-sized, round nose, and hardly any cheekbones. I see the dark circles under my eyes. If they were blue, I'd look just like him.

I turn away from the mirror and crawl into bed. I dream of a blue-eyed stranger holding my hand and walking with me. As we go, I see that his hand is nothing but bone. I look again and see that his entire body is disintegrating. I walk with him until his skeleton smile crumbles into dust.