

Schrodinger's Daughter

Your daughter sends you a text: "Still alive. Didn't get struck by lightning. Need a ride." The message is punctuated with a smiley face emoticon.

You are furious. She *knows* you're worried, and then makes a joke of your worry with a silly smiley face. As if she *assumes*, just *assumes*, you'll be happy to know she's still alive and well.

And of course, you are. It almost takes the edge off your anger at her for sneaking out in the first place to the pool party you forbade her to go to. For one thing, she was grounded *and* suspended from school for the pot in her locker. For another, you don't believe for a second she was going to something as wholesome as a pool party. *And* it's been thundering all day.

But out she sneaked, fourteen years old and invincible. And now soaking wet and in need of a ride home. The only thing that surprises you, really, is the part about the pool party being true.

Isn't it amazing, you think on your way to pick her up, how she so completely takes for granted that no matter how mad you are, you'll be equally glad to hear she's fine? You have to ask yourself: Did I do something completely right--or completely wrong?

Two years and many escalating incidents later, another text message with the same infuriating smiley face: *still alive. You?*

You pass this on to the police. They've been looking for your daughter for two full days. The police love a good stranger abduction, and you have no qualms about taking full advantage of this. You swear on everything holy that your daughter does not have a history of sneaking out or running away.

But this is a small town. Everyone knows, Sheriff Ernie included, that your daughter does indeed have a history of slipping out her bedroom window. Still, you're a respected member of the community. You are privileged. Your word counts for something. You're the Wee Praise Minister at the United Methodist Church, for one thing. For another, you gave Sheriff Ernie's tone-deaf son a solo when the children's choir performed *Yes, Jesus Love Me* during the Offering on Easter Sunday. Sheriff Ernie returns the favor by pretending you just might be telling the truth.

Later, when your daughter emerges from the back of the cruiser seventy-two hours past her curfew, Sheriff Ernie lets you weep against his starched khaki shirt. He doesn't remind you he put his job on the line getting out the whole force to look for your daughter the minute you called. But he does, rather officiously, return her dental records--like, here, you'll probably need these again, soon. His way of saying we're even now. You understand the police will not knock themselves out the next time your daughter disappears.

The dental records are panoramic views of your daughter's skull. She was eight when they were taken—the first step towards braces, which it was obvious she was going to need. And now here they are in your hand. You hold them up to the fluorescent kitchen light while your daughter washes off her latest adventure in the shower. How naked, how ghostly, how vulnerable, how *anonymous*, these pictures of your daughter's skull. You'd think you'd know them anywhere. You'd think you'd be able to pick out your child's skull in a line-up, easy. Her face is etched in your heart, after all. You assume you'd recognize what lies beneath. But you don't.

After she turns eighteen, you can't call the police anymore. Now, when you haven't heard from her in weeks, you pester her old boyfriends. One tells you to try Platinum Plus. You look it up online. It's in a strip mall (ha!) between Shoe Carnival and Rite Aid on the I-64 interchange.

Inside, there's a fat man behind a cage. You tell him you're looking for your daughter.

Name, he says. You tell him. Stage name, he says, like you're an idiot. What kind of mother would you be if you knew this?

Long blond hair, you say. Very slender.

You're sure he knows her. She's so *singular*, your daughter. He'd remember her, you're sure of it. And if he knew her, surely, surely, he'd care about her.

You tell him you haven't heard from her in ages. You're worried about her, you say. Can he tell her, please, to call her mother?

You want me to tell every girl in here to call her mother, he says.

Yes!, you cry, even though you know how ridiculous, how old and pathetic, this makes you sound. Tell them *all* to call their mothers!

His smirk—well, you can't think of a good metaphor for his smirk. He shrugs his fat shoulders, tells you to go inside and look for yourself. He makes you pay the six dollar cover.

There's no stage. A young girl, mostly naked, grinds with sad seriousness, barefoot on the sticky floor, less than a foot away from a table of sad, serious men. The girl is thin, almost skeletal. She has long blond hair. But she's not your daughter. She could be, but she's not. Maybe your daughter's in back, waiting to come on next. You don't have the heart to find out. You leave. You understand what a luxury it is to leave, what a luxury not to find out, yet.

Weeks later, anyone with information about Jane Doe found in the canal off I-64 behind Platinum Plus is asked to call a special number. The newspaper says the unclaimed body had been (had been!) in her early twenties, of slight build, with a homemade tattoo on her ankle.

Your daughter has a homemade tattoo on her left ankle. She made it with a razor blade and blue food coloring when she was fifteen. She used the food coloring you once dyed Easter eggs with. You recall the artistic, delicate lilt of the flowers' petals around her left ankle, your unexpected, unwelcome pride at its craftsmanship.

You call the special number. The state policeman tells you the tattoo is on the body's right ankle. Suddenly you're not sure—was it her right ankle? The body also has a tattoo on the back of the neck, professionally done, a Chinese symbol, he tells you. Did your daughter have a similar marking? You don't know. It could be recent. Or her hair might have covered it. Her long blond hair. Her special pride. And yours.

He suggests, very sensitively, you come in, for your own peace of mind. Most likely it's not your daughter, he says. It could be anyone's, he tells you. Chinese symbols and ankle tattoos are not exactly unique in Jane Does. He tells you two other mothers have already called.

You tell your boss you need some personal time. She's a good woman, your boss. She nods but doesn't ask for details. She knows it must have to do your daughter. You've left in the middle of the workday on similar, vague daughter errands. She has a daughter, too, though hers is "good." Still, you can't help thinking about the fat man at Platinum Plus and wondering if, maybe, your boss is just better at hiding her smirk.

On your way to the morgue, a picture of your daughter's eight-year-old skull in a manila envelope on the seat beside you, you get a text. You guessed it. *Still alive. You?* No little smiley face this time.

Calmly—you're impressed by your calm—you tell the woman behind the bullet-proof glass that the man who threw your daughter's body into the canal is using her phone to send you texts.

And then dark wings beat against your ear.

You find yourself in a plastic chair with your head between your knees. Someone is telling you not to sit up just yet. Someone is asking if there's anyone they can call.

My daughter, you think.

And then someone else is asking you something. Not the woman behind the counter. A man. Is she of Asian descent, he's asking. Was the girl's father Asian? Was she adopted?

No, you say, or somehow indicate.

Then it can't be your daughter, he says.

Again, those dark wings against your ears, but more distant now, the hungry dark vulture off to other tragedies. Not yours, this time.

On your way back to the office, you make a wish: Let me die before her, even if it means dying now, tomorrow, soon.

And then you make another. No. Let me live forever. To remember her.

Again, you're impressed by your calm.

And then, a question: what did it mean, the Chinese symbol on the back of that other girl's neck. And why hadn't you asked?

You know that question will keep you company as long as you live.

