

Traffic

The sounds of cars honking and tires rumbling over the speed bumps echo off the sturdy bricks of the three story walk-ups and low rise apartment buildings that crowd the narrow street. The sounds become softer as the blood rushes to my head. I can feel the black iron rail of the porch pressing into my back. My hands dangle, above my head, but below me. I wiggle my fingers and they tingle.

I look away from my hands and try to see the bus stop at the end of the block. It's almost time for my mother. Every day I wait for her to step down from the oily black steps of the city bus. She always stops and stands on the sidewalk for a minute, looking down the street with her back to our building. I think she is looking for my dad, but I don't think she really wants him to be there. It's a habit, like smoking. I watch her shoulders move as she pulls her pack of Virginia Slims from her purse. When the gray cloud of smoke rises above her head, she will turn and walk towards home.

But today I am watching the bus stop from upside down. The cool air tickles my nose and my bare feet. Despite my precarious position, the thrill of being untethered from the earth for a few moments is far greater than my fear. And I trust Jeff. The bus rumbles into sight and Jeff's hands tighten on my ankles. I feel the rush of cool air across my cheeks as he jerks me upward, flips me around, and deposits me on the cold cement of the porch. I shake my head to clear the spots from my vision and struggle to my feet.

"Jeff! What were you doing to her?" It's my older sister, Peggy. She has silently stepped out onto the porch behind us, hands on her hips, a miniature eleven year old version of our mother. "Are you stupid? You could have killed her."

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“She weighs next to nothing and I have a good grip on her ankles. I’m not going to drop her. Anyway, she like it. Right, Diana?”

I nod. “It’s fun, like flying. He won’t drop me, Peggy.”

Her face is the same color it is after she’s spent too much time at the lake in the summer. “She’s six, Jeff. She doesn’t know any better. You and I are supposed to be looking after her until Mom gets home. If something happens to her we’ll be grounded forever. If you ever do that again I’m telling.”

“Telling what?” In the time they have been arguing, I’ve missed Mom’s departure from the bus and her cloud of smoke. I run to her and wrap my arms around her waist. She rubs the soft brown curls of my hair. Neither of them speaks. Mom keeps rubbing my head, but I know she is waiting for an answer.

Finally I hear Jeff. “Nothing, Mom. I just told Peggy a joke, and she thought I was making fun of her, but I wasn’t. Sorry, Peggy.”

Nine years later, in another apartment on a different street on the north side of Chicago, the hum of engines and squeal of tires flood my bedroom through the open window. Jimi Hendrix croons about traffic lights turning up blue on the record player as I lay on my bed studying the ebony walls and ceiling. A tingle of excitement and a slight tightening of my stomach come simultaneously. Redecorating seemed like a great idea this morning, but now it’s almost time for my mom to get home. Maybe I should have just painted the walls black and left the ceiling alone. The sound of knocking comes from down the hall, barely audible over the

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sounds from outside and my music. I am almost to the door before I remember that we have not heard from Jeff in weeks. The transit time for letters from Vietnam is sluggish, but he has been a consistent writer since he was deployed. My hands feel cold and damp as I slide the chain aside and unlock the door. I fumble with the knob twice before I manage to grip it and pull the door open. The hall is dimly lit and, at first, I think I am imagining things. But then Jeff, dressed in full uniform, drops his khaki knapsack and opens his arms. I scream and fling myself into the hall. His arms fold around me and I forget about my bad paint job.

I stand in the chapel that leans high above the city and watch the silent cars creep by far below on Lake Shore Drive. My wide brimmed ivory hat is digging into my scalp and giving me a headache. I slide my index finger under the band to relieve the pressure. I don't want to mess with it too much or I'll ruin my hair. It took Peggy two hours to curl and arrange it and she'll kill me if I mess it up.

“Almost time, Honey.” Mom's hand is warm on my bare arm.

I look down at the cars one more time and turn to her with a smile. “Okay, here we go.”

We walk to the door of the chapel. From the back of the room I can see the entirety of the small vestry. Everyone is there, waiting in their folding chair for the service to begin. It seems like there are too many people crammed in. I can feel the warmth, even from the entryway. I feel a little sick, both from the heat and nerves. I wonder how Adam is feeling right now and why he isn't already in his position at the Alter. We practiced yesterday and he was supposed to be ready and waiting by now. I begin to sweat, my heart pounds. Did he change his mind? Did he leave?

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There is a rustling up in front and suddenly he appears – seeming to rise from the ground in the front of the chapel. He had just been sitting in the first row with his mom. Adam takes his place and fidgets with his dark brown jacket. His blue eyes are aimed at his shoes so he doesn't see me watching him. Then the music begins and his head jerks up. His red hair flaps wildly. His eyes focus on me and he smiles. My stepfather, Jon, takes my arm and we float down the aisle.

I feel the mattress move below me. My eyelids are too heavy to open but I can tell that the bed has been shifted into a slight sitting position because my head is higher than my feet. There is a hum of voices around me but I can't make out what they are saying. A warm hand presses gently against my forehead, then a second softer pressure. Lips, I think. A kiss. Then a cold sliver of plastic presses in between my dry cracked lips. I taste a drop of bitter liquid and slowly fade away again.

Two years after the wedding. I pace frantically, searching for the sound of sirens through the open window. The last dregs of cold water in the bathtub gurgle down the drain but otherwise there is only silence. The pile of small clothing, a blue striped onesie and tiny socks, lay on the faded olive carpet in front of the bathroom door where I had dropped them in my hurry to get Jenny, my baby, into the cold tub.

I hug Jenny close to my chest and feel the searing heat of her small feverish body through my t-shirt. I listen to the harsh rasping of her breaths. I want to take her temperature again, but I am afraid. The last reading was 103 and that was twenty minutes ago. Where is the damn ambulance? What if her fever is higher now despite the tub and the fan? At last, the wail of the siren breaks through the suffocating silence of the small third floor apartment. Jenny still burns my chest with her hot body. I run to open the door to let the paramedics in. There are two of them, both impossibly young looking with smooth faces and wispy blonde hair. How can I let

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them save her? They are only children themselves. I should have called my brother Jeff, also a paramedic, but a few towns away. He could have made it here almost as quickly as these two have.

“Can I see her, Miss?” The shorter of the two holds his arms out and steps toward me.

“She’s so hot,” I say, but I don’t loosen my grip.

His partner sets down his bag and smiles at me. “We can help her, but you have to let us see her. I promise, you can watch the whole time.”

Jenny moans in my arms and begins to shake. I finally hold her out to the paramedics and they take her and set her on the couch. They ask for ice and I go to the kitchen. I fill a bowl from the freezer and bring it back to them. As I watch them, I too begin to shake. I sink down to the scratchy carpet and begin to cry.

It is late, well past midnight, and Peggy and I have just left our shift at Cas and Lou’s. Of all of the jobs I dreamed I would have when I grew up, waitressing was not one of them. I yank the black apron over my head as we walk and crumple it into a ball. Too late I think of the wrinkles and how, now, I will have to iron it before tomorrow night. As we cross the alley to the car, I see a tiny white and brown kitten. It sits, head cocked to the side, and studies us as we walk. Its eyes glow in the street lights and the skinny brown tail swishes back and forth. I crouch down and pat the ground in front of me. It trots over and rubs its head on my hand. The warm softness of its fur makes me forget about the complaining customers and my wrinkled apron.

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The kitten is purring and it is loud enough to be heard over the sounds of cars bumping over the uneven terrain of Irving Park Road. “What are you doing, Diana? Let’s go!” Peggy calls from the car and I reluctantly stand and turn to leave. The kitten follows me and meows as I reached for the passenger side door. Without giving myself time to over think it, I reach down and scoop the soft bundle into my arms before ducking into the car.

“What are you doing? It might belong to somebody.” Peggy doesn’t start the car.

“It,” I lift up the kitten. “He doesn’t have a collar or anything. He followed me and I couldn’t just leave him.”

“What about Adam? I’m sure he really doesn’t want a pet right now.”

“Sure he will. He loves cats. Besides, Jenny’s two now. It will be good for her to have a pet to grow up with.”

Peggy shakes her head but starts the car.

At home, Adam is waiting up for me on the couch, the late night news playing quietly on the TV.

“What do you have there?” He asks as he gets up to kiss me.

I show him the now sleeping kitten curled in my hands. “He followed me. I thought he’d be good for Jenny.”

Adam laughs. “Just for Jenny, huh? Not because you know I’m a sucker for animals?”

We tiptoe down the hall to Jenny’s door. She’s curled in the corner of her bed, surrounded by her stuffed dogs and bears, thumb shoved into her mouth. Her blonde curls hang across her forehead. “Should we wake her up now?” I ask.

“She fell asleep pretty early. Might be about time for her to use the potty chair anyway.”

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Adam shakes her awake. She grumbles at first, but when she sees me she climbs out of bed and toddles over. I kiss her head and then show her the kitten in my hands.

“Ohhh a kitty!” she squeals. The kitten wakes at the sound of her voice and hops down to the yellow linoleum. He sniffs her toes and licks them. She squeals again and runs around the kitchen. The kitten chases her around and Adam leans over to kiss my cheek.

I rise out of the haze again. There are still voices, but this time I can tell who they belong to – my kids. I can't distinguish separate words, but I know the sounds of my babies anywhere. There are so many things I want to tell them, so many things I need to say, but my mouth is a traitorous beast. I try to move my lips to form the words I need but, instead, only a moan escapes. I want to cry. My eyes do not fail me and warm wet tears slide down my cheeks.

Four more years fly by in a flash. I am where I would never had imagined myself – living in a townhouse in the suburbs. When Adam and I learned that I was pregnant again, we had to find a larger place. Our small apartment in the city wouldn't do and we couldn't afford a larger place there.

And now I stand frozen in the middle of my new kitchen frozen with panic. There is a moment of terrible silence, only a second really, but it seems to stretch on for an eternity. Then Daniel releases a furious frantic cry. I propel into action and scoop him up from the cool linoleum where he landed after he slid from the bouncy feeding seat. I hold him up and search for signs of damage. His little face is almost purple with rage, a combination of the hungry temper tantrum and fear from his fall. Other than that, he appears to be okay. He had been screaming because he was hungry and arched his little back and propelled himself out of his feeding chair onto the kitchen floor.

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My heart is pounding and my head throbs. I am so tired. My stomach aches with guilt. I know I should have tightened the restraints on the seat but I wanted him to stop screaming. I hurried to get his cereal ready so that he would just be quiet. I never realized how much harder it would be to have two instead of one. I hug Daniel close to my chest and his screaming slows to a hiccupping gasp. Jenny slams the screen door open and runs in. “Why is he screaming? What happened? Why is his chair on the floor?” Her little face is red from running and from the sun. I forgot to put sunscreen on her before she went out to play. I think I am a terrible mother. I join Daniel’s sobbing.

Now I see the years cascading by at an even faster rate. It doesn’t seem possible for time to go by so fast. Adam and I have worked hard to send the kids to the best schools, enroll them in every extracurricular activity that they express the slightest interest in. In my free time, I lead Daniel’s scout group and help Jenny with her homework. They’re both athletic, somehow, and I have become a champion spectator. The sounds of sneakers squeaking across polished gym floors, the crack of starting guns, and the lapping waves of the pool flood my evenings. Lately, while I am sitting in the bleachers, I find myself thinking about the days of my childhood and how we were allowed to spend our time running wild through the city. I was so ignorant of the dangers today’s parents see lurking around every corner. Or maybe they didn’t exist then.

Who knows.

I watch from my perch on the stool at the kitchen island as Jenny, just returned from her first semester away at college, stands in the doorway. The three dogs are barking, the TV blares, and Daniel and his friends are running around the house, chasing each other with nerf guns. Her face is a mixture of bewilderment and annoyance. I try to tease her into the room. “You know, this is all your fault. You left me here in Boydom. I’ll never forgive you.”

Finally Jenny smiles and walks all of the way into the room. She drops her duffel bag and laundry hamper on the floor with a soft thud, barely audible above all of the other noise in the house. “Well, you’re the one who made me try so hard in school so that I could go to college far away.”

“And I’m very glad I did. You look great.” I stand and reach out to hug her. She is the first person in our family to go to college and I feel a surge of pride every time someone asks how she is doing. And she does look beautiful. Her trim athletic body is cloaked in tight black pants, high brown boots and a loose mauve sweater. Her blonde hair is cut shorter than it has been since she was five and it shines in the bright kitchen lights as it dances over her shoulders. She looks grown-up.

And she looks out of place now, in our cluttered kitchen. She even seems smaller, as though a piece of her had been left behind in her dorm room, tethering her to somewhere other than home. Even though she is physically present, I know she is gone. She no longer belongs here, under her parents’ roof. Other than her breaks and visits, our days of all four of us living together are through.

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Slush splashes against my windshield as I ease off the ramp into the stream of traffic on the freeway. I have the radio off, the cheerful tones of the disc jockeys are unbearable. I force myself to drag my eyes away from the rearview mirror, from the smiling woman without a care in the world who inches along behind me. The years of hard work Adam and I have dedicated to the sole purpose of providing a better life for the kids seem a waste. All of the money, time, schools, activities, hell, even the life in the bleached suburbs, feels like it was pointless.

Daniel is nineteen now. He goes to the local community college. He has a deferred wrestling scholarship that he plans, or rather planned, to use starting his sophomore year. He had wanted to get some Gen Ed courses out of the way and save some money before he went away. Yesterday he sent Adam and me an email. An email! Informing us that his girlfriend, who I had thought was an ex-girlfriend because they had broken up before she went away to college four hours north of here, is pregnant. Apparently, the weekend trips he had been taking to see his “friends” at another college were really trips to see her. And to sleep with and impregnate her.

So now, instead of college and wrestling, his future includes no money and a pregnant girlfriend who he had been willing to part ways with only a few months before. My hands are shaking. I grip the wheel harder to stop the trembles. Goddamn, the kids were supposed to have more, they were supposed to have everything. The bitch behind me leans impatiently on her horn and I accelerate in the small space that has cleared in front of me. I roll down the window and flip her off with my left hand.

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I grip the railing as I climb the stairs to the break room. The steel railing cuts into my hands, but I am afraid that I will fall if I loosen my hold. A searing pain, like a bolt of lightning, slices across my temples and I have to pause on the landing. Suddenly, a roar fills my ears and my body begins to shake uncontrollably. The floor rises to meet me face and I let go and fall into darkness.

A wailing siren is screaming in my ears. It is impossibly loud, impossibly close. I want it to stop because it hurts so much but I can yell, I can't move. Something is holding my arms down, my mouth closed.

My eyes fly open and I am in an unfamiliar place, a bed that is not my own. The steady beep of machinery echoes in my ears and the sterile stench of hospital stings my nose. MY arms ache and my head feels like a grenade exploded inside it. As my vision clears, I see Adam peering down at me. There are worried creases in his forehead and shadows beneath his eyes. For the first time, I notice the gray at his temples and in his goatee. He opens his mouth to talk to me, but no sound comes out. Instead, his blue eyes fill with tears and he turns his head away. Then he turns back to me and leans down to kiss my forehead. His lips are hot.

He starts to speak again and, although his voice is hoarse, as though he has been crying for a long time, this time the sounds emerge.

“Di, honey, you had a seizure at work and you fell down some stairs. We’re in the hospital now, Northwestern. The doctors have been taking good care of you but it seems like there, well, there’s a problem.”

Through the haze of the drugs and pain in my head I know what he is going to say before he finishes. All of the small things I had felt over the last few months, the headaches, the

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exhaustion, the dizziness, I had blamed them on age, menopause. But I hadn't been able to shake the nagging sensation that something was wrong. And now, I know.

“Di, the seizure, it was cause by a tumor.” Adam is crying now, big droppy tears roll down his cheeks. The doctor will be back in a few minutes and we can talk about the options for treatment.”

His words, even though I had already realized what was wrong, break the dam holding back my tears. They leak from the corners of my swollen eyes and drip onto the pillow. All I can think about is my beautiful grandson, the one I hadn't wanted. Oliver just turned eight months old and all I can think about is will I get to go to his first birthday party?

Not only do I get to go to Oliver's first birthday, but by the time his second rolls around, the tumor has been obliterated by radiation and chemo and my neurologist presents me with a clear scan. Adam and I go out to dinner at an old favorite restaurant in our old city neighborhood. He is smiling at me across the table and we hold hands throughout the meal like teenagers.

I return to my job at the food supply company and finally begin to feel like I am back to normal. I feel like me.

The pain starts slowly, a twinge near the base of my spine. I buy a brace to wear under my clothes at work and lather on Icy Hot. I tell myself that all the years of working on my feet

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have finally caught up to me. The pain grows worse. My next routine MRI reveals what I already know. My tumor had returned. The neurologist devises a plan of attack, Chemo along with a targeted radiation treatment known as a cyber knife. I listen to the words, but all I can think about is how helpless I felt last time. I couldn't drive, couldn't work, couldn't do anything on my own. I had finally been able to return to my life and now, just like that, it was over.

Peggy's voice wakes me, almost. "I love you sis." And then there is Jeff, "Hang in there, Di. I love you." But I don't think I can hold on any longer. I try to swallow but instead feel like a wad of cotton is lodged in my throat. I try to cough but nothing but a strangled gasp comes out. Warm hands pull me upwards and pat my back gently.

The tumor shrinks but it does not disappear this time. The pain intensifies and my left side is losing feeling. The fingers on my left hand are a separate being. I tell them to wiggle, to move, open and close, and they just ignore me. The best they can manage is a weak shake, but never when I want them to.

On a warm day in early autumn, I sit in the driver's seat of the Jeep I can no longer drive. My walker is parked next to it in the driveway. It took me nearly twenty minutes to get from the front door to the car. I fell and twisted my ankle, it just gave out under me and, before I could do anything to catch myself, I was on the ground. Adam is at work and I don't want him to come home and find me on the ground. I don't want him to find me sitting in the Jeep either, but I couldn't stay in the house another minute. I turn the key in the ignition, just so that the radio comes on, but not the engine. I lean over and grope in the glove box for the packet of hand wipes. My fingers close over the cellophane packet and I pull them out. It is difficult to open

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them with only one hand. Tears of frustration and pain from my throbbing ankle course down my cheeks and blur my glasses. I take a deep breath and concentrate on the task at hand.

I hold the packet in my mouth. It tastes like sanitizer and dust. I resist the urge to spit it out and instead yank the tab with my good hand. I pull a wipe out and begin to clean each crevice of the vehicle. It's the only useful thing I can still do.

And now the losses accumulate at a frightening rate. Walking with a walker devolves into not walking at all. The wheelchair is always uncomfortable and digs into my spine, my butt, my arms. The stubborn disobedience in my left hand climbs up to my shoulder and down my left leg. My words become jumbled before they reached my tongue and those that make it out sound like they are being spoken by someone else. I try not to talk too often because I can no longer stand the sound of my own voice, the nasal echo it produces. I cry at the slightest provocation, sometimes without any reason at all.

And then we go to the doctor for a checkup and to see if anything can be done to make me more comfortable. He looks older than he did just five short years ago, sunken and shrunken in the way only stress and sadness can waste someone away. Dying catches up to you after a while, even a doctor.

He clears his throat and looks directly in my eyes. "At most, you can probably expect two, maybe three months. We've exhausted all of our treatment options. The best we can do is try to make you as comfortable as possible." His voice shakes a little. "I'm really sorry Diana and Adam. Any other options will only prolong suffering rather than offer any relief or cure. We tried everything we could."

“Thank you, Doctor.” Adam shakes his hand and pushes my wheelchair out. As we leave the hospital, I turn my face up to the sun. Even though it stings my eyes, I keep my face turned until Adam lifts me into the car and kisses my cheek.

Adam takes a leave from work to care for me. Jeff and Peggy visit frequently and so do Daniel and Jenny. They sit and talk, tell me stories about things they remember from when we were kids or when they were growing up. My mind is so cloudy on most days, there are so many pills, that it is a struggle to call up all but the most loved and careworn memories. These play over and over, as if on a reel in my broken mind, spinning on long after they all leave and it is just me and Adam again. These memories are like driving. They are the accumulation of the fleeting instances when traffic slowed enough for me to reach out and grasp something lasting.

Jenny. Before she speaks, I know it is her by the slight shift her small body makes in the mattress next to me. Everyone else is heavier, the bed sinks when they sit. Then I hear her voice. Shaking and heavy with tears. “It’s okay, Mommy. It’s okay to let go. You can go now.” A sob. Then I feel her warm hand grip mine. “I love you.” Something breaks free in my chest. There is a sound like a bell ringing very far away. And then I am flying again. Hanging over the city, trusting Jeff to hold tight to my ankles while I fly. The bell gets louder and louder and then blurs into silence.