

## Everything is Fine

Bridget was in the car driving home in slow traffic the first time it happened. As she fumbled in her bag for her ringing cell phone, she half hoped she wouldn't get to it in time. But it might be Scott, running late, or it might be Daphne, stuck somewhere and needing a ride. It might be Kevin, home alone at age 12 but still uncertain how to do many things ("It says pop it until it stops popping, but how will I know when that will be?"). She answered before registering that the screen announced an unknown caller. It was the very last person she expected to hear from.

"Bridge?" the voice was distant, staticky.

"What?" she said, even though she had heard him.

"Bridge? That you?"

"Who is this?" she croaked. Her throat was too dry to work properly.

"Well who do you think, for Pete's sake?"

She said nothing for several long seconds, but there was no denying who it was.

"Daddy?"

"So how's things?"

"Daddy, how . . . how can you call me?"

“What d’ya mean? It’s not a very clear connection, is it?”

“Daddy – you’re – aren’t you dead?”

“What? Oh, dead, yeah, sure.”

“Why are you calling me?”

“Just wanted to check in with my little girl, that’s all.”

At that point, the driver behind her had honked, jerking her back to the job of driving home, and when she next spoke into the phone, she heard the unmistakable emptiness of a lost connection. The little digital clock showed the call had lasted just about a minute.

She elected not to mention the call to anyone, even Scott. She decided it was stress, which was probably known to cause hallucinations. She refrained from doing any sort of google search. How would she phrase it? Phone call from dead parent . . . .

He had died two months earlier, after a terrible struggle with lung cancer. He had not smoked - he was innocent, and he had suffered. Bridget had suffered with him, watching as he struggled to breathe and wondering why he didn’t simply give up. She would have, in his place. In her own place, however, Kevin still needed a mother and Daphne, rattling the cage door at 17, probably still did as well. And she didn’t have cancer. She was a healthy 50 year old, a little shaky from grief, a little depressed about work. The fact that she had received a call on her cell from her dead father wasn’t really anything to get worked up about. It wasn’t.

The second time he called, the timing was equally bad, even worse. She had just answered when a patient walked into the office, early for her appointment. Amada was a skeletally thin 16 year old in the eating disorder clinic where Bridget was one of two social workers. Business at the clinic was booming.

Amanda was back for her fourth – or fifth? – in-patient stay at the clinic, which was situated in an old estate on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. The girl found increasingly inventive ways to avoid eating her dinner, docilely accepting a feeding tube the last time she was there. Her languid movements made Bridget think that lifting the spoon was simply too much trouble. She would be beautiful – all the patients were startlingly beautiful – with a few more pounds of flesh. Bridget had been at the clinic for six years, and no longer found her wispy patients disconcertingly thin.

“She’s struggling,” her more senior colleague said of Amanda, shaking her head sorrowfully. “She’s really struggling.”

But Amanda did not appear to be struggling. She moved swanlike into Bridget’s office, placed herself in the fake leather chair, and lifted the corners of her mouth in the bare minimum of a polite smile. That was another thing about the clinic patients – they were polite, quiet, well-behaved. They did not want to cause any trouble. They simply did not want to eat.

“Daddy,” Bridget half-shouted into the phone, an old habit. Her father had been hard of hearing in his last few years. But was he still? “Daddy, I’m in a meeting. Can I . . . can you call me back later?”

“Sure, sure,” the jovial voice answered. “Don’t want to interrupt a meeting, do I? Sure, I can call you later. Just wanted to check in, honey. That’s all.”

When she put down her phone, Amanda was staring at her with mild curiosity through the fog caused by malnutrition. Bridget shrugged, tried to give a dismissive smile. Not much she could say, under the circumstances. She assumed the patients were unaware of the loss of her father – personal information like that was never shared.

Bridget had talked to Amanda's mother just that morning. It had not gone well. Amanda weighed 92 pounds. When Bridget had told Tricia on the phone that the weight the clinic wanted her daughter to reach, one way or another, was 128, she had met with resistance. Tricia had jumped into her sports car (Bridget did not know cars but she had noticed this one pulling into the parking lot) and driven out to the clinic.

"*She* won't be happy at that weight," her mother had said, chewing vigorously on her gum. She smelled of cigarette smoke. "She looks good at about 110. Let's shoot for that."

"The minimum weight for her to be healthy is 128," Bridget said calmly. "She's tall. We're not thinking about appearance right now, although I know that will be an issue. We're talking only about her health – the health of her bones and her organs. When someone is at such a low percentage of their ideal body weight, the damage over the long term is considerable. Her bones will suffer, her fertility could be affected." It was an old argument – for some reason, many of the parents resisted her on this.

"Fertility," Tricia snorted. "That's not an issue!"

"Well, eventually, maybe."

"Believe me, the women in my family get pregnant if you look at us funny." She recrossed her legs – she wore very tight jeans and high-heeled boots. Bridget thought about what she might say to this argument, and decided a steady gaze might be the best

response. She kept her face impassive. Tricia was a bit below average height herself, buxom, with a tight face and carefully straightened hair. Her body looked constrained and unnatural, and Bridget wondered what her shape had cost her – liposuction, possibly more invasive surgery. Constant, restrictive dieting and exercise at the very least. The world, she thought, had an eating disorder.

“No, really, she’s thin, she’s thin. She’s too thin. But when she refeeds she gets that belly on her and – I’m not saying it bothers me, you know, but can’t you set her some exercises or something to keep that belly off? She’s thin and she’s tall, like you said, and well, she *looks* pregnant after she’s been here!” This with a laugh.

“They do get a little belly,” Bridget said. She had already explained this to Tricia as well, more than once. “But it gets redistributed in a few weeks. It goes away. You know she can’t exercise for a while because she’ll just lose the weight she’s working so hard to gain.”

This of course was a lie, as Amanda was doing as little as possible to gain, and in any event appeared to be succeeding in keeping herself just as thin as she was when she had been admitted to the clinic two weeks earlier. Her body now seemed to resist weight gain.

“Right, but, between you and me, I don’t think she looks that bad. She looks like a model!”

You fucking idiot, Bridget thought. She jotted a note in the chart: Mom is very resistant to diagnosis of anorexia. She forced herself to smile and look friendly. “We have to confront our own feelings about how women are supposed to look, don’t we? All

those airbrushed images of the impossible, ideal figure. That's part – one part -- of what got Amanda here in the first place.”

Tricia narrowed her eyes. “How much do you weigh, if you don't mind my asking?”

Bridget raised her eyebrows. “I weigh 130,” she said, subtracting the five pounds she had gained since losing her father. She had been ravenously hungry for a couple of weeks after the funeral, and had developed a habit involving buttered toast in the late afternoon and sometimes again before bed. She intended to weigh 130. It was a healthy weight for a woman her age and height. She noted her lie with only passing interest.

She didn't ask Tricia why her weight was important. She knew that the parents mistrusted therapists or dietitians who were overweight. She supposed Tricia thought she looked a little heavy, but in fact, that wasn't the case.

“You look nice and slim,” Tricia said. “You're thinner than me. I have to work at it. I can tell you're just naturally thin.”

This was flabbergasting – Tricia appeared to have squeezed herself into a size 2. This was anorexia, right here: Everyone else was thinner.

Bridget thought, at that moment, that there was probably no hope for Amanda. Her mother had ruined her.

And yet, here was Amanda, sitting up a little straighter and looking at Bridget with a rather more focused gaze than usual. Bridget glanced down at the chart in front of her, and got a little surprise. Amanda had, in the last week, gained two pounds.

“So, how are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better, I think,” Amanda answered. “I’ve gained, haven’t I? I saw the scale this morning.”

“You have, just the right amount,” Bridget said. “How do you feel about that?”

“Well,” Amanda sighed. “It doesn’t feel very good, you know. But I guess I’m just going to keep going. I mean, I just found out one of my friends is going to a therapist for anorexia and I’m afraid she’ll end up here, and I’m really worried about her. And then,” she paused. Amanda had never talked this much to Bridget in any of her five residencies at the clinic. “My boyfriend came last night during visiting hours. And he told me how much he wants me to get better. He knew me when I weighed more. And, you know,” she trailed off.

“It helps, his saying that?” Bridget prompted.

“I really like him,” Amanda said. “I guess I want to be healthy for him.”

“I’d like to hear you say that you want to be healthy for you,” Bridget said. “But that’s a start.”

“I guess I just want to be healthy,” Amanda said. This was, perhaps, the first step. Bridget was pretty sure she would change her mind at some point, but at least she knew how this feeling felt.

“That’s great,” she said. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Yeah,” Amanda said, vaguely, seemingly unaware she had made any psychic transition. “So . . .” She raised her gaze and studied Bridget with her beautiful green eyes, which gleamed large above the overly prominent cheekbones. “So how are you doing?”

How was Bridget doing? It was odd to be asked that by a patient. She thought about this on the way home, the twenty-minute commute slow with heavy after-school traffic. Bridget had arranged her schedule years ago to get home shortly after school let out, choosing to start the day at 6:30, leaving her children and husband to manage the morning on their own. Shelly, the other social worker, was resolutely not a morning person, and not a mom. She blew into work at noon, or thereabouts, and was on hand to manage any dinnertime panic. It worked.

Or at least, it had for a long time. She supposed she was simply plodding along now, doing neither well nor poorly. She gave her own feelings very little thought. It was easier to worry about others' feelings, and that was of course her job.

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The Critical Care Unit had not been what she had expected, but then serious illness and death tend to defy expectations. What shocked Bridget the most was the bustle, the ordinary life going on where she had expected quiet and respect for her father's last days.

She had sat for three days around the clock next to her father's bed, slipping guiltily into the family lounge for occasional snacks, forgoing showers and sleeping in her chair only when she couldn't keep her head up anymore.

"Do you think you're keeping him alive, doing this?" Scott had asked when he had stopped in to deliver two more peanut butter sandwiches and a change of clothes. He

had lost his own father the year before, and in any event had always been able to see through her fairly easily.

“Maybe,” she had said. “It seems to be working.”

“Maybe it shouldn’t be,” he had answered. Her father’s rattly, raspy breathing was by then only an occasional thing.

But just the afternoon before, he had turned his head slightly on the pillow, his gaze lighting on her with a look of bright confusion, and spoke: “Who are all these people?” he had said, his voice barely there.

“They work here, Daddy,” she answered. Snippets of conversation floated in to the glass-walled cubicle where he lay, had lain for a few days by then, his face grey against the white sheets.

*“ ... and I said to her, he’s my cousin too, so.... ”*

*“They said they’re gonna move her to a regular floor .... ”*

“All these people,” he had said, distress agitating him.

Was that life? It didn’t look like death.

As it happened, Bridget had not been paying attention when her father actually did die, slipping out from under her gaze and whatever power it had had to hold him. She realized slowly that the silence in the room had become more profound, that she was now the only one there. That was all.

When she called her cousins to let them know, one of them expressed gratitude that Uncle Henry had passed so peacefully. “No,” Bridget had said. “Not peacefully at all.” Illness had violently torn his body, but looking at his situation from the outside, it hadn’t looked that way. Was death always sudden, no matter the preamble?

“Well, at least you got to say goodbye,” his neighbor had said at the visitation.

Had she said goodbye? She didn't think she had, actually. Neither had he. Since her mother had died while Bridget was in college, she and her father had become closer, but there were still a lot of things they didn't do, no “Love-yous” at the end of the phone conversation, no reaching out across the kitchen table to grasp hands and acknowledge what they actually meant to each other. They just didn't do that. It was okay that those things were unsaid – they both knew them.

The one bone of contention, the pebble in the sock of her father's serene world view, was Bridget's job. “Why do they not just eat when they're hungry, for Pete's sake?” her father would ask, his tone angry, when Bridget talked to him about her patients. Having come from a poor background, he had no sympathy with anyone who spurned food. “Is it super willpower? It's a slap in the face of God.”

“You don't believe in God, Daddy,” Bridget would remind him.

“Well okay, a slap in the Buddha's face. What about him? Do I believe in him?”

“I don't know, do you?”

“Buddha was a rich man. It's easier to do without when you *choose* to do without. Are all these girls rich?”

“Pretty much,” Bridget would answer. “Or their families are. Which is not necessarily the same thing.”

“No, not necessarily,” her father would answer. And thus the conversation would move on, without anyone having to explain who or what they believed in. Bridget had always believed in her father, without giving it too much thought. And then she began to believe in Scott, which in no way diminished her belief in her father. She believed in

Daphne and Kevin, mortal gods all. She believed in psychology and the power of food, and the necessity of simply forcing herself from the bed every morning. She didn't believe in overthinking it.

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When she got home from work, Daphne, wearing a short frilly skirt and cowboy boots, was eating Nutella from the jar with a spoon. Daphne had dressed in this way as a small child, passed through a brief goth stage, and was now back to the way she was at five, only sexy. She was all legs and long hair, with a faint scattering of acne across her forehead that Bridget found reassuring. She knew not to mention that to Daphne, even to offer a remedy. Her job as a mother was not to notice acne.

Bridget had never in her life dressed in short skirts and cowboy boots, and her love for her daughter was given additional sparkle by envy.

"Ew, that is so gross," Kevin said, bounding into the kitchen in the stained tee shirt and sweatpants he changed into as soon as he came home every day.

"It's not a bit gross!" Bridget said, throwing herself automatically into defending her daughter's right to eat Nutella. "She can eat what she wants. So can you. So can Daddy and I."

"She's putting her drooly spoon back in the jar, Mom!" Kevin said. "That is gross."

"Mom," Daphne said, her voice as always a little lower than Bridget expected it to be. She sometimes wondered if this was an affectation, but if so, it was a well-maintained

one. “If I was going to be anorexic, I would be by now. Right?” She licked the spoon clean, closed the jar with satisfaction, and stuck the spoon in the dishwasher, moving with flippant grace.

“Not always,” Bridget said, knowing they weren’t listening. “It can really hit at any time, out of the blue.”

It was her father who had taught her how to feed Daphne. Bridget had been following the doctor’s instructions to the letter – first rice cereal mixed with breast milk, then some baby food bananas, and hideous pureed peas. Her father mixed fresh applesauce into the cereal – daring innovation -- and took obvious delight in spooning it into Daphne’s tiny sticky face. The creamy goo with swirls of translucent fruit didn’t look half bad.

“Groceries is s’posed to taste good,” he had said, beaming, as Daphne opened up for more with uncharacteristic gusto. Her inability to sit up steadily made her mouth a moving target.

For Bridget, that day marked a liberation from following every old rule of child-rearing, because her father’s new rule made more sense, and seemed to cover more situations that might arise. It was supposed to taste good; it was supposed to be fun; you were supposed to be happy. That was her father’s *modus operandi*.

“Bridge?” The static was worse this time.

“Daddy! I want to talk to you so much. Where are you? What’s happening?”

“It sure is good to hear your voice, honey.” There was a pause. Her father had never really been good on the phone – why should anything be different now?

“Everything’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

Was everything fine? Listening to the news on the way to work that morning, she had heard reports of another shooting, innocents killed. One country dug out from a flood while another honed warheads pointed at a neighbor. Nothing was fine. There were bad people, and bad luck. Her news story was another person’s tragedy.

Maybe it was the fact that she was growing accustomed to her father’s voice in her head, but a phrase he had used when she was a teenager suddenly came back to her: “I can only do what I can do.” It had infuriated her, because at that time, no matter what the problem had been, what he could do had not been adequate.

She hadn’t been a pleasant teenager – not like Daphne, who often sulked briefly, pointed out her mother’s shortcomings, and then was able to put it all aside, forgive the world, and become sweet and funny and loving. Kevin had not yet reached those years, was still her teddy boy, still let her hug him if she approached at the right moment, generally from behind, and resisted the urge to bury her face in his hair and, once in a while, weep a little.

Was it possible to love anyone more than she loved her family? Was everything really fine?

She walked into the lounge where the patients spent their days, a pleasant room with big couches, tables set up for board games, low-stress activities and easy craft

materials close at hand. There was a television playing softly in the corner, some innocuous, pre-screened daytime show that would not make anyone fret about weight, fashion, or any big problem. The clinic kept the world at bay, because in some ways the world was blamed for these nymphs' overwhelming problems. They needed a break from the mayhem that was life, but then they'd have to go back into it. Somehow in this lull, this pause, they'd have to figure out how to survive.

There was laughter coming from the clinician's station, set against a wall so that whoever sat at the desk would have an unobstructed view of the entire room. But the nurse and the therapist on duty now were not paying any attention to the patients. They were chatting about their weekend, ribbing each other in a friendly way, the nurse lounging back in his chair and flipping a pencil in the air while the therapist leaned against the desk and flirted with him gently, her scrubs covered in little hearts, her hair starting to escape from her ponytail.

The patients were equally relaxed, basking in the warm sun coming through the windows, reading, chatting. Two sat at a card table, paying scant attention to a jigsaw puzzle. It was an airport with no flights expected, in or out. They were all just there, waiting. Sometimes waiting was the only thing to do.

The custodian was sitting on the floor in front of the desk, replacing a piece of molding that had not fit properly over some recently installed carpet. Bridget stood and watched, the quiet chink and rasp of his tools stroking the back of her brain. He carefully placed the wood, adjusted it, pulled it out and worked it back in, deliberately, taking every bit of time to make it fit. When he was finished, something would be better, but the process was what made her nearly ecstatic, a solid happiness she could feel in her spine.

She saw Amanda sitting on a padded window seat, her gaze focused outside, a small smile just lifting the corners of her mouth. It looked as though she was accepting her two new pounds, and was ready to accept a few more. For the first time, Bridget thought that Amanda, too, would be fine. She would overcome the bad juju her mother had placed upon her head, she would gather her forces in this respite from reality, and then she would graduate, and move on.

Bridget knew for that moment that she was exactly where she was supposed to be. The roof over her head, the trees over the roof, the clouds in the sky – she was perfectly placed. She could do what she could do.

This was life -- pain, loss and drudgery, evil, sickness, and bad luck -- salted every so often with moments of the sublime. The feeling might not even last as long as her drive home. Daphne and Kevin would be sparring when she got there, gently, claws sheathed. Laundry would have to be sorted, and dinner would have to be made, but probably at least one member of the family would acknowledge her efforts because they were all nice people. Scott would come home, a little later than she wanted him to, but he would come home. Everything was perfect.