

Until This Happens, Keep the Secret

The sky is a lazy pastel blue, obscene in its perfection, the color of so many linen beach shirts and impossible postcards.

The detectives tell me they need a word in private, so we leave my house to talk out on the sidewalk. The cement is slowly burning the soles of my shoes with midafternoon heat. As a little kid, I pressed my hand against those rough concrete squares until I couldn't bear it any longer. When I did that and closed my eyes, it felt like touching the skin of some great stone beast. The heat made it seem alive.

"We need your account of what happened," says the detective in the white shirt. "It's very important, when somebody dies suddenly like this, for us to understand exactly what happened."

"César—am I getting that right?" the other detective asks. This one has a nose that's pink and moist with sweat. It's slightly misshapen, like a left-over potato nobody wanted to claim from the grocery.

They wait a beat for my reply.

"It's 'say-zar,'" I say. "Not 'see-zer.'"

"I know it's painful to talk about, see-zer," the pink-nosed detective says, and coughs loudly into his hand. "We want to make this quick and painless so you can get back inside. I know this is hard on you, son."

I'm barely listening. This detective's nose is steadily reddening under the sun. The rest of his face is a Martian landscape of red spots that shimmer with topical gel.

"To tell you the truth," he continues, pointing a salmon-hued index finger at me, "I think I know you. You spoke at the graduation ceremony last week, didn't you? The one for Windom Prep?"

I nod.

"I knew it. I knew I recognized you. I was there to see my son. Where're you headed to college?"

"Yale."

"Yale. Jesus. You must be a very bright kid."

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“I don’t know,” I say. “I guess.”

White Shirt—the other detective—clicks his pen, brings it down to the notepad in his hand and says, “So let’s start with the first thing you remember about this morning.”

White Shirt is tall and thin, like me. His button-up is tucked neatly into his trousers, held together by a brown leather belt displaying both a gun holster and his badge. His ovoid head is bald, linoleum-smooth and so immaculate there are waves of heat radiating from it, like a desert mirage.

It feels as though the sun’s hovering right above us, dialing up the saturation of our surroundings into vivid Technicolor. The sidewalk has been steadily heated from a low flame to angry gray fire; my feet have begun to sweat freely. I’ve always, even from a young age, thought sunlight in the southwest looked suspiciously artificial. It’s tinged with a fluorescence that seems more appropriate for the probing light of an orthodontist’s chair, or actors on a theater stage.

Other than us, my street is deserted. It’s just rows and rows of anonymous stucco houses, garages shut tight and unfeeling, yards full of sun-bleached gravel that sounds like ripping paper when you step on it.

A bead of sweat traces a warm path down the side of my head until it’s absorbed by my sleeve. The air stinks of fresh-cut grass, hot asphalt and sweat. Despite the heat, Pink Nose has begun to sniffle from an apparent cold. I’ve lost track of how many seconds have passed since White Shirt last spoke. He glances at his partner and raises his eyebrows as if to say can you believe this fucking kid?

“I woke up around noon, I think,” I begin, closing my eyes to the two of them. The world is now a dark prenatal red.

I had been in the pool. Our house had been empty for the week because my parents were up in Kayenta, visiting relatives on the Navajo reservation there. They’d asked me to house-sit. I’d been floating in the inner tube, wearing sunglasses, looking up and watching the path of a small plane as it cut through the sky. The air tasted of chlorine and sunblock.

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“And after a little while I noticed Mrs. Wainwright on her roof.”

“When was that?” asks White Shirt, not looking up from his notepad.

“I don’t know.”

“Can you guess?”

“Sorry. I really don’t remember when I noticed.”

Pink Nose furrows his brow, looks at his partner and says, “Jim. C’mon,” real quietly. White Shirt tells me to keep going.

I tell them Mrs. Wainwright had a reputation around the neighborhood for doing weird shit. Climbing onto her roof in the middle of the day—even if she was quite old—wasn’t necessarily out of character for her.

“What kind of weird shit?” White Shirt asks.

“Well, there’s the dream catchers. You guys saw those, right?”

“Yeah,” Pink Nose says, “we saw them.”

Mrs. Wainwright was a widow from way back; my dad once told me that her husband was a soldier who died face-down in the dirt outside Da Nang or something like that. According to my dad, she started with the dream catchers after the funeral. At first it was just a few—an innocent little hobby our homeowner’s association turned a blind eye to. Soon her porch was shielded in a wall of those willow hoops, twirling and writhing in the breeze. Whenever my father would ask her what the hell was going on with the damn things, she used to scrunch her face up all tight and glare at him. “They’re for Annette,” she’d say, meaning her eight-year-old granddaughter. “To protect her.”

My father hated those dream catchers. He used to spit on her yard every time we walked by. “Westernized garbage,” he used to say, and then he’d spit.

I remember one summer afternoon a few years back—after my old man hocked a loogie onto her yard with a vehemence typically reserved for baseball games and bad news—I decided to take matters

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into my own hands. That night, I egged her house with a couple neighborhood friends. I walked by it the next morning to inspect the damage, and saw that the yellow smears we'd left on her windows had already turned filmy white from the heat. Mrs. Wainwright was nearby, cleaning the garage door. She was dragging a sponge across the metal using both hands, her arms shaking violently with the effort.

She had duct taped a slew of new dream catchers above the garage. They were purple and turquoise. As I walked by, she turned, saw me, and started ambling over.

Panic. It crept over me like the shadow a cloud makes during a full moon. I wanted to flee, to pretend like I didn't see her coming over, but I couldn't. When she finally reached where the driveway met the sidewalk, she pulled one of the many dream catchers tied around her wrist and handed it to me, saying simply: "Take it. You never know."

"César? You still with us?" White Shirt asks, snapping his fingers and jolting me from my memory.

"Yes, sorry," I say, rubbing my eyes. "I guess even with her history of weirdness, it didn't make any sense to me why Mrs. Wainwright would want to go up on her roof during the hottest part of the day. And when I saw her granddaughter with her is when I started really paying attention."

"Her granddaughter was with her on the roof?" asks White Shirt, staring so intensely it feels like he's looking through my head.

"Yeah. Didn't she tell you that?"

"Annette hasn't been able to tell us much of anything, yet," Pink Nose says, "she's still in shock."

The dress Mrs. Wainwright wore on the rooftop was floral, flapping madly in the hot wind. In her right hand was Annette's arm. In her left hand, a dream catcher. She was saying something to her granddaughter I couldn't make out. She reached up with her little willow wisp of an arm to hang the twine charm on the metal prong of her satellite dish. To do that, both she and Annette had to stand close to the edge of the roof.

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You could tell Annette saw it first. The single-engine plane was making its return journey, the same one I'd been watching fly past earlier. It dragged a banner in its white wake, a colorful advertisement for Chef Boyardee ravioli that hadn't really registered with me until just then:

"Until this happens, keep the secret," it said.

Above that tagline there was a boy hugging a stalk of broccoli and grinning ecstatically, like something straight out of a Dorothea Lange photograph. On the boy's right side, under a red bowl of soup, there was another tagline: "Obviously delicious. Secretly nutritious." Annette began to gesture to the banner wildly, her eyes stretched back into pale, ripple-less pools of wonder. Her grandmother turned to look for herself, unlacing her dry white hand from Annette's, and bringing it to her brow to shield her eyes from the sun. I think it was the simple act of moving her hand to her forehead that caused her to slip. She lost her center of gravity. Her arms pinwheeled madly, and her face twisted into a sudden realization of something ugly.

"I think she knew it was over before she fell off the roof," I say, staring up past White Shirt and Pink Nose at the sky.

"What makes you say that?" asks White Shirt, scribbling.

"I saw it written on her face. She was in shock."

But I knew I saw more than just shock. It was understanding. And maybe beyond that—awakened in the recesses of her mind, teased out like a cornered animal that knows it is about to die—there was acceptance.

She fell quite unceremoniously and cracked her head open on the pavement near her pool. Annette saw everything, of course. Long after I screamed for her to get down from there, she stayed exactly where she was on the rooftop, unwilling or unable to look away. I didn't see it, but I did hear the sound Mrs. Wainwright made when she hit the ground—the dividing wall between our houses shielded her body from view. I knew right after it happened that I'd never escape that sound, and that it would

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follow me, whispering in my ear, until the end of my days. They said later that she hit her head on the pool deck hard enough to cause a subdural hematoma, and that was how she died.

“Is that it?” one of the detectives asks as I finish my recounting of this morning’s events. Just, “Is that it?” a trisyllabic crunch that comes from one of their mouths about as casual as you’d ask “How’s the weather?”

All of a sudden I feel like I am outside my body looking down. Pink Nose is ending our little talk by saying something perfunctory about dealing with trauma. I imagine that the eyes of my future consciousness are also staring down at me in judgement, and that they will always be staring down at me, looking down on this stretch of sidewalk, because the truth is I know that this is all destined to happen again and again and again, this catastrophe, because nothing we bear witness to is ever really over, not now and not ever. I will always be there, lying in that pool, flayed by the whip of what we can see and yet do nothing to stop.

It happened four hours ago—and it happened right now.

You’d think I’d want to forget it all, but I don’t. To forget is to move on. And how can I do that? And what’s Annette going to do now? What am I going to do now? I want to ask these questions of the detectives, I want to clutch my chest and sink to my knees like they do in the movies, but I can’t. I’m all stopped up. The only thing I can do is hope that when I look down on myself and this scene years in the future, I won’t be numb like I am now.

My shirt is ringed with sweat and clings to my chest as we walk back inside the house, shutting the door behind us.

Hours later I sit on the bed in my room and stare at the dream catcher in my hands, the one Mrs. Wainwright gave me. I’ve kept it in a shoe box in my closet for the last few years—I don’t really know why. It felt wrong to throw it away, I guess. Slowly, I let my fingers run over its web.

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I keep thinking about that advertisement. “Until this happens, keep the secret.” It seems silly for someone’s life to end because of ravioli, so I try to come up with some different interpretations of the tagline. It could be that it had nothing to do with ravioli. Maybe it was really about death and dying, about how we want to protect the people we love from learning the truth behind these awful things, and of course they end up learning about it anyway. I don’t know. I close my eyes and lie down on the bed, hugging a pillow tightly against my chest, drifting off into a place where nobody keeps anything from anybody and where we are all allowed to forget.