

KNOTS IN RED THREAD

It was the Blue Ruin that brought us back to school twenty years later, survivors of an unlikely reunion no one could have ever imagined. They dubbed it Blue Ruin because the sky was a scorched ceiling, a canvas of dark rage and ravaging red flames against an endless midnight of swirling smoke. Remnants of wars witnessed previously by the media, Desert Storm and the Taliban, were now a numbing reality for us.

When I heard rumblings of a shelter being set up at my old high school three towns over, I had hoped I was healthy enough to be accepted having refused to touch the torrent of nonperishables lying scattered along side of the road—sterile containers of whole grain crackers, brown bread encased in airtight plastic bags—for fear of contamination, but I did drink the water the soldiers handed out from silver canteens. They picked me up after days of trekking barefoot and I had no choice but to go with them. The need to close my eyes to the witch hunted world had won me over; the long lines of broken bodies, their limbs twisted at disturbing angles or even worse, missing. Their eyes lifeless as stones. And that one lone sneaker perched on top of a pile of ruins balanced in flight as if the owner's foot had been yanked from its sole.

Miraculously, some structures were left standing but gutted, their windows gaping open like the flapping gums of an old woman whispering of a prophecy, a message of archangels' descent.

Hundreds of us streamed the school's staircases and hallways, trying to remain calm and contain our mounting terror and anxiety. We were the fortunate few to find shelter, instructed by the supervising staff not to spread panic, warned not to topple the apple cart or we would be evacuated immediately. *We cannot risk a full blown hysteria*, they drilled, which was somehow deemed more contagious than the actual contamination surrounding us. They were severe and threatening, this staff of Secret Service and military men, separating us by name, assigning us by

an assortment of number calibrations which made us all on edge recalling an unspoken infamous atrocity. Callous and cold, they forbade speaking or touching anyone outside of our designated divisions which made no sense to me. There seemed to linger a level of superiority in our shelter, a dirty underbelly of polite politics and preferential treatment as if the cliques of yesteryear were the chosen ones rising like a phoenix from our ashes, while the underdogs were drop kicked behind.

It was during my second day at the shelter while waiting for roll call when I caught sight of my old high school boyfriend Joey Bainbridge, and as if no time had passed we merged together daringly tight, familiar yet foreign by our seasoned skins. I did my best to ignore the aroma of our unbathed bodies and the undertone of primal fear, the indistinguishable musk of disbelief. But it was comforting to see a recognizable face despite the crevices now etched underneath his somber eyes. The slight slacking of his long ago chiseled jaw line. He was wearing dark dress pants encrusted in dried dirt and a button up shirt I assumed had originally been starched white. His tie—amazingly—remained noosed around his neck, casually unclasped as if it were Friday Night Happy Hour and he had just walked into a corporate club after a rough work week.

“I was in the office when it happened,” he explained, reading my mind. “Had just enough time to grab this little guy. His daycare was on the same floor, thank God.” He let go of me and leaned down, lifting his image into his arms, a flawless-faced toddler with thick, wavy hair, black bottomless eyes. “What about you?”

I shrugged because I couldn't speak. Hadn't been able to since it happened and I knew my voice wouldn't return until my family did.

He bowed slightly in what I took was understanding, closing his eyes against the pain of memory. “Eve and my girls are gone too,” he said glancing misty-eyed at his son sleepy against his shoulder. A fringe of raven lashes.

Eve. Of course his wife’s name was Eve.

I must have scowled or grimaced because straight away he flustered and mentioned faith, how we should not give up, his face lifting to the ceiling as if a reasonable explanation could be plucked from the air. Or possibly he was praying for anointment by an unknown angel of redemption.

An uneasy pause passed between us and then the blast of the first siren signaled our imminent presence to assigned sleeping stations. “Well, I’m a ‘B’ and you’re an ‘S’, so I guess that means...” he trailed hesitantly, his expression an exposed apology.

The school’s gymnasium was an emergency ward and the auditorium was where I—the M’s through Z’s—slept. The others had the luxury of the enclosed courtyard with its shatterproof windows. They were the lucky ones who got to count invisible stars at night and dream of distant galaxies where peace permeated instead of war.

But for one infinite moment Joey and I stood staring into each other’s eyes, oblivious to the stench of death and despair, the harried souls scurrying around us emitting curses under their breath hurrying to their correct quarters. Our high school history flipped through my mind like flash cards, freeze frames of photographs against a backdrop of black blurry white.

I nodded. *Yes I understand, we can’t stay here, we need to move on.* But I couldn’t help follow him as we parted ways. Noticing how broad his back still was. How tight his behind. Just as I remembered. Then I waited, watching his profile as he turned to speak to his son riding his hip. Caught a glimpse as they touched foreheads, and my breath caught too.

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We first met in eleventh grade. He sat next to me in chemistry class, the only one we shared. He made me laugh, smile despite my silent dissuasion and we became close friends—he wasn't my type. Too posh and polished. His stature short, his heart large.

He was also extremely persistent for late that June on the eve he turned seventeen, I found us parked on his wraparound porch sharing beer in plastic cups from the keg flowing in his basement. Most of the incoming seniors were there and I had no idea why I was. These were the idolized jocks and pompom peers of Plainsville High. I was the outskirts of town, the other side of the tracks. But Joey was my friend and it was his birthday so how could I refuse when he asked me to stop by.

“So Anna, where's my gift?” He peered over the edge of his cup, his dusky eyes dancing over me, flirting as always.

“Your gift?” It never occurred to me to bring a present to the party. I was anticipating warm beer and soft rock, hopefully a joint or two passed around. Not gifts and fanfare. It wouldn't have mattered anyway because what could I have possibly bought for him? Joey had everything a guy could ever want.

He chuckled then, brushing off my embarrassment. “A kiss,” he said, without hesitating. “I want you to kiss me, Anna.”

Maybe I did it because I'd had one too many, or maybe I was just mildly curious, but mainly I think it was because he looked so trusting and true standing there in his royal blue Giants T-shirt, the melon moon a gauzy glow in the summer sky. I had experienced sex before; clumsy, bland, brief messy entanglements leaving me wondering what all the hype was about and when I leaned towards him with slight dispassion I was taken aback because this, this kiss

was different. It was thunderclap meets fireworks, supernova encounters gamma ray bursts. It was pheromones and feelings and his sensual lips convincing mine they were created special by the universe to awaken my slumber at seventeen.

And so for the better part of the following year and halfway into the next, Joey and I emulated a couple on a Kotex commercial. Holding hands and cuddling. Strolling off into sunsets. He would fling me around like I was his own personal playground while I walked on weightless clouds, until he forced me to become catty and clinging. And I forced him into the arms of another loose floozy from the inferior crowd. I suppose I had been too much for him.

Yet, there were a few incidences in our early twenties when we collided, drunk and desperate for reconnection. Two severed souls bumping in the night navigating the wrong side of the road. We should have known it would never work. I was notorious for driving dangerous and speeding. He tended to pause for pedestrians and bunnies lying limp on the bend. Stop for roses.

At some point during my three and one half years at community college I came across an old Chinese legend about an invisible red thread that connected certain people meant to enter your life. Supposedly, the gods tied you to the ones you were fated to be with, joined by this special strand for a specific spiritual intention and whatever happened throughout your life, whether you stayed in touch or apart, you would be forever strung together by this transcendental thread. And if you drifted, well then one day your bond would return and you would be reunited. It was unbreakable, irrevocable, this red thread. It was destiny.

Joey, I believed, was my red thread. My first and only love—my soul mate—and it had unnerved me a few years ago when I heard he preferred to be called “Joe” since he matured and married, living “happily” in the suburbs in a McMansion with three kids, probably a Range

Rover and Golden Retriever, too. And of course that mistress stashed securely in the city, I reminded myself late at night.

By that time I realized we weren't destined to be after all and decided to settle for the reedy working stiff who sat two desks down from mine at the collection agency where we both were employed. He was quiet and colorless but after some time I concluded we had much in common; antiquing and old movies, gardening and libraries. We married in the backyard of the fixer-upper we purchased on a dime. It had a beautiful backyard full of wildflowers and blueberries, a brook flowing into the woods behind. And the rickety white arbor I walked under was my aisle.

But still, Joey would visit me sometimes, creeping in late at night through unconscious thoughts and dissonant dreams, hanging around for days after. Just like we used to do when we were teenagers cast in clumps on downtown street corners, invincible individuals we were, testing out identities, seeking smoother waters. Some things never change.

Now, we were seeking survival—water, bread, shelter. Strength to go on searching for our friends and families. I gave up on mine after a week of wandering the hundred foot radius where our two bedroom home once stood. I remembered after one too many miscarriages, a stillborn and years of struggling to adopt, my husband John would tell me repeatedly how resilient I was, how strong, and his words became my mantra as I picked through the pieces of sheetrock from my buttercup colored kitchen, the upended furniture he and I had scored at yard sales on lazy sunny Saturdays. Broken glass and picture frames, one tiny sock trimmed in pink lace, the pair of provocative high heels I had splurged on and never worn, incredibly intact in a shiny black box. For days on end I picked through pieces of my loved ones, pieces of my life before. Before the East Coast of the country was shredded to its bare bones like aged parchment

paper, leaving a fine veil of confetti swirling the atmosphere. Floating motes coated us in their talcum.

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Each morning when the sirens whined, we would rise from our cramped sleeping spots, ears piqued to that certain someone of the staff who rang out the long list of those who had perished while we slept. But I never let myself listen. It wasn't that I didn't want to know, it was because I didn't want to stop believing this was all an exceptionally bad dream, something rancid eaten was causing me to live this cruel nightmare. And then, when I had no choice but to open my eyes, I held onto the hope that my lineage was still out there somewhere, waiting in another school, surviving in another shelter, denying the sound of my name, too.

It all changed when I stepped foot into the makeshift chapel on the third floor one especially oppressive afternoon. I presumed the room had previously served as a biology class from the dozen lab tables pushed against the wall. Now, rows of wooden planks rested awkwardly on cinderblocks. I sat down on a pretend pew and watched a woman with torn pants, her thighs bloodied and bare, crouching in a corner speaking softly to a little girl clutching a shabby stuffed teddy, her baby blues blank and vacant. She was far, far away from here, but the woman stroked the child's shoulder over and over, bringing her back to this life. Back to the crowd of chaos continuing around them.

Too painful to look at them any longer, I inched my way towards the end of the plank, sitting behind a family of four brothers. I could tell the children were siblings by the same slope in the nape of their necks, the same lilt in their low voices, and the aura around them. A perceptible aura of concentrated violet floating above their heads and I smiled knowing their

souls would be safe. Purple was the color of strength and an enlightened spirit. It was one of the highest rhythms of positive energy.

But when I heard the pulpit's circus leader babble on about God's way, of His plan and how everything has a time and place, I sat there swaying to a silent symphony, remembering the song of Maple trees whispering in the breeze and the warmth of the summer sun. The smell of the sea. I thought about the perfect curve of my daughter's cheek and the pitch of her cry. The delicious scent of her delicate six month old scalp and the weight of my husband's hand curling mine when we first heard about it happening in other places far from ours.

My God, can you imagine, we asked ourselves in shock. *So terrible. So tragic.* The audacity to utter: "Thank God we live *here!*"

How confident our comments were as we witnessed distant worlds destroyed, consoling each other—*it could never happen to us, no, not here. Not us!* Wrapped up tight in a privileged cloak of gratitude and bravado.

But it was too late for solace from signs of the worst times to come. No more hand holding or telling ourselves we were free from danger. Only the echo of sorrow, the timbre of primal keening. Deep, disturbing sounds that made the floor of that chapel tilt and everything tunnel black and the Purple Family to turn around and stare, their mouths agape, eyes saucer wide. Others began turning their heads, too, slightly standing, craning to see who it was breaking down and toppling the apple cart. Who it was risking their life by full blown hysteria.

It took me only a moment to realize they were looking my way. To comprehend it was me who was the brazen bruised apple falling from the tree. And I ran from that claustrophobic hell, searching for the stairs, for a way out. But when I reached them they unfolded in front of me like an accordion or a backward escalator and I was trapped at the top, the sight of my family

torn from my arms like a horror movie flickering through my mind. Everything tumbling back to me like a roiling tornado. The sight of my husband's face, serene and grey while he lay below the shattered sheetrock of our once cozy kitchen. The feel of my daughter's foot, cool and rigid, her infant form cocooned beneath the demolished living room sofa.

These were my visions as I stumbled down that institutionalized staircase, flailing out the shelter's main entrance of my old high school. Strangely, the next thought crashing through my mind was of Joey and his kiss, and suddenly there he was just a few yards away, his beautiful, brawny back hurrying toward the football field where clean water and untainted food was being offered.

Then out of nowhere, it hit me. It was June. Joey's birthday was in June. He'd be turning thirty-six, just like me. "Joey," I called feebly, the caress of his name intimate against my tongue tied by our invisible red thread.

He whipped around as if expecting a chase, blinking quickly like a nervous tic. Or maybe, an intangible sun was blinding his eyes and he could no longer see because he looked right past me.

"Joe," I tried again, but my mouth was filled with stones. Smooth shiny stones, like the ones left in small piles marking graves.

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They accused me an outcast, my expulsion setting the example, setting the precedent of what would happen should anyone else commit such an abominable scene as I; screaming and swearing, firing stones at the shatterproof glassed entrance, delirious and chanting as if entranced by a vile diviner. For the burden of my fate and the suffering I would surely endure was evident now that I discerned everyone I had loved resided in the Otherworld. It was unfathomable to me.

And in that moment, in that one earth-shuddering moment, I perceived the omen that has been scrutinized since the beginning of time.

If asked how long I spent in the asylum, I wouldn't have an answer. It could've been years, months or mere minutes I laid there trapped, strapped to a lumpy cot bounded by old leather belts and crudely made chains, not knowing if the world still spun or if I was the last soul left alive. Drifting in and out dreams depicting my family's death and the purgatory where I now dwelled, where time did not exist.

Although after a while, I thought perhaps time had never really existed at all, for my roaming hands were frozen forever, lost in a secret sanctuary no one else could see, hidden from the rest of reality. It was if my thoughts were weaved from a lair in the sky—not from Mother Earth—causing me to dance and sing as pure as I once did in the womb, and I wondered if that's where we went to after we perished. Back to our original origins, protected by the confines of a celestial being, no longer free falling in our cluttered minds, spiraling in an infinite abyss.

Soon, I realized just because I could no longer see or stop time, I could still feel the weight of it, feel it beating behind the blank curtains of my eyes. I reveled in its brevity, and also in its permanence. Grateful for the many memories filling the void that was now my existence. I learned there that time could be twisted, molded in your mind, predicting your future—appearing as a changeling of friend or foe, a lost love, even.

Then one day, my spirit was set free, I was loose again in an insane world, free from my physical constraints, able to choose my own fate. To be honest, when I was finally released I wasn't shocked at all to find that the town appeared pretty much the same as I remembered it. Same as before the Blue Ruin turned everything an ominous black. Before my life had been turned upside down by the mighty fist of transgression.

But in honor of my family's fatalities, I willed myself to move on and within a few weeks, I landed a sales position in a bookstore, the inside scent of printed paper reminding me of our small den back home and as if it were yesterday, I was yet again among those shelved walls filled with my husband's favorite literature, beautiful prose disguised behind moss green and dirt brown covers, embossed with gold-gilded edges. The infamous fables I would never have the privilege to read to our daughter. Working in that store was a soothing balm, hearing the hushed swish of books opening and closing, the sound of pages precariously turning like the sweet song of angels.

Their stories called to me, whispers of old souls who knew regrettable decisions derive from illicit indiscretions and how paradise will never weather time.

Perhaps it was my destiny all along, because the day he reappeared I found myself waiting for him. I expected those broad shoulders seen stooped over a pile of best sellers. And I was not surprised when he turned to me and said, "Ma'am, could you help me please? I'm looking for an original of Steinbeck's East of Eden."

"Oh?" I responded, hoping he would hear the regret in my voice, the yearning for mercy.

"It's a gift for my wife's birthday. She collects his books," he explained, shifting his weight from foot to foot. But I knew he didn't recognize me because he stared straight into my face without flinching or blinking an eye, his pupils dark limpid pools, unenlightened.

A chill passed through me as I wrapped the book in white tissue paper tied with a red ribbon and sent him on his way.

He didn't notice when I followed him home, following his familiar backside as if led by an invisible path of not thread but Belladonna petals. Despite my desire, deep down I dreaded what I was about to do, and as I tiptoed along the trail that guided me down a side street in a

closely-knit neighborhood, sidewalks scattered with signs of normal everyday life, I almost had a change of heart. Because this street was nothing like the utopia I'd envisioned, nothing close to that kiss I experienced many blue moons ago. But still, I could speculate that domestic intimacy, their scent of idle contentment and sense of continuity. And I longed for that again.

Yet, I wasn't fully prepared when I peered into Joey's window, probing into the heart of his home, because what reflected back in that glinting glass made me falter. It was the image of an old woman with long flowing hair the color of flames, skin as pale as pearls, and the tempt of heaven lurking behind her eyes.