

## Playing Favorites

The sinkhole appeared the summer the twins turned fifteen, emerging silently overnight. The yard slid gradually toward it, gaining speed and pitch until it suddenly dropped straight down into a dark well with no discernible bottom. On the far side, at the edge of Angela's property, the twins' old metal swing set canted two legs over its side, a jumper on the edge of a building.

Humphrey barked at her and strained at the leash she'd wrapped around the porch railing to keep him from following her into the yard. He was half blind and wouldn't rest unless she was close by, but the last thing she needed was for him to end up at the bottom of this ... whatever it was.

The boys, too, practically vibrated on the deck, their need to inspect the crater wafting off them in desperate waves. "Stay back," she yelled. It was useless even saying it, she knew. They'd be down here the second her back was turned, probably spelunking by the weekend.

Christ, like she needed this on top of everything else.

Did homeowners cover this sort of thing? Was it something she could Google? "How to fix a sinkhole?"

The guy from city works spat into what was left of the summer-parched grass and shrugged. "Don't think it'll get any bigger than this," he said. He looked about twenty, like he could've played soccer with Ash and Griffin or babysat for them back when she and Donnie did normal couple things like date night. Too young to be dealing with crises in her backyard, that was for sure. He probably didn't even shave. "But it might. Probably a cave down there. Saw a show once

where a hole like this ended up leading to a whole bunch of caves with an underground river and all that. Kinda sweet.”

Angela laughed, a harsh bark. “It’s a giant fucking hole. In my yard.”

He shrugged again. “I wouldn't go down in there or anything, but it looks pretty stable. Nothing’s moving now, anyway. I'd get a guy from the university to come out, one of them geologists, see if he can take some readings or whatever they do. But it looks to me like it’s done all it’s gonna do.”

Dropped as a baby, she decided. It was the only explanation for him.

He smiled at her and shook her hand like a real grown up. “Have a good day now.”

Dr. Gonzales was a great doctor. Angela knew this, intellectually. They could’ve been friends in an alternate universe maybe, meeting for happy hour martinis and tapas. The med students probably used her as a role model, the shining star of Memorial General. Dr. Gonzales had her shit together, Angela had to admit that. Intellectually.

Angela hated her.

She knew she shouldn’t kill the messenger blah, blah, blah, but Dr. Gonzales pushed every button she had just by opening her mouth. Nothing good ever came out—words like “glioblastoma.” Words like “inoperable and highly aggressive.” Words like cancer.

It had started with headaches, pressure behind her eyes. Then one day a week or so ago, she realized the entire right side of her body was weak and thought she’d had a stroke.

Apparently not.

"Mrs. Maines?" Dr. Gonzales looked at her. "I know how difficult this must be for you to hear."

"So if we can't do surgery, what do we do? Chemo? Radiation?"

Dr. Gonzales ran a hand through her hair, dark brown silvered with a coarse gray streak at one temple. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Maines," she finally said. She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked directly at Angela. "It's not that we can't do those things. We can try the chemo, the whole bit, but I have to tell you as your doctor—and as someone who cares about you—that all we can do is prolong life for a few months at this point. Remission is unheard of in patients with these types of tumors. We can put you through all the treatments if you want, and see if it makes a difference. Or you can take the rest of the time you have without all the side effects the treatment would cause. I can't make the decision for you." Dr. Gonzales leaned back in her office chair. "I'm sorry." Again with the sorry.

"How long?" Angela asked. Thank God, her voice stayed firm.

"A year at most. Possibly eighteen months with chemo and radiation."

Not possible, not possible, not possible, not possible. Not her. Not now. Not with all life still had out there for her. "That's it then." It wasn't a question.

"That's it."

After the tears finally stopped, Angela lifted her head from the steering wheel and concentrated on the twins. Nothing else, she told herself. Just think about the twins. The boys were night and day, had been that way since birth. Griffin, the dominant twin in the womb, ate like a horse while Ash refused to nurse. Griffin, the

smart and popular one from the first day of kindergarten, had a cruel streak that occasionally surfaced with Ash, who couldn't help just being ... nice. There was no other word for it. He was sweet and helpful and always *trying*, the poor kid. Puberty had hit him hard, too, much harder than Griffin: angry red pustules concealed his face no matter what they tried, no matter how many products she bought or doctors they saw. The world would eat him alive without her.

She slammed the car door and rounded the side of the house to the back porch. That damn hole was still there, eating up her yard, and Ash—her Ash—stood on the slope only feet from the drop off. Her breath stuck in her chest, spiky and huge.

She stood frozen as Ash leaned down and picked something up from the ground by his foot. He turned it over for a moment then flung it into the well with surprising strength.

She caught the shape for a moment, highlighted against the dark soil: a toad, brown and lumpy, its legs flying apart as it cartwheeled end over end and disappeared.

"Ashton Flynn Maines!" Angela found her breath and launched herself downward to him. A dark part of her mind registered how easy it would be—momentum, overbalancing, stepping off, sailing—

She pulled herself to a skidding stop, dust pluming up around her knees, and grabbed him by the shoulders. Up close, his eyes looked red and tears stood out on his cheeks, but she was already too far into the primordial brain for them to register. "What the hell are you doing down here? I told you not to come off the porch! Do not get close! Are you trying to get yourself killed?" She shook him so

hard his rusty blond hair rocked off his forehead and back again before she caught herself.

God, how could a mother have a favorite? A mother of *twins*? But her boy, her Ash, so close to that emptiness—it was unthinkable.

“What were you *doing*? What were you *thinking*?”

“I just—” He pulled away and jabbed a finger at his face. “Look at me, Ma. Look at this. It’s not fair. Why doesn’t Griffin look like this? Why is it just me? Dammit.” He swiped angrily at his cheeks, trying to get rid of tears or the zits themselves Angela wasn’t sure. “There was that toad and I got pissed.”

“I’m so sorry, baby.” What can she say to that? “Let’s go inside, now, okay? I don’t like you down here. It’s too dangerous.”

She followed him up the incline into the house. God, she was tired. Her brain tumbled in a thousand directions, each thought careering off in a new direction. Her skull hissed with white noise.

She’d have to tell the kids. “Ash.”

He stopped with his hand on the banister, worn smooth from years of hands, one foot on the first riser with its shabby runner. “I know. Stay away from the hole.”

She kissed his cheek like he was still a child (he was, dammit, fifteen was just a child, still), despite his ravaged skin. She usually kissed his head when he allowed himself to be kissed at all. Then she nodded and watched him climb the steps toward the ruckus of unchecked carnage filtering down from Griffin’s Xbox.

Angela laid in the dark and listened to the house breathe. It was after

midnight but she was nowhere near sleep. Her right eye throbbed and strobed, as if the cancer were eating through her optic nerve, her retina, spilling out onto the pillow, her hair, her cheek.

She wished for Donnie, then. Or not Donnie himself so much as the idea of a Donnie, someone in bed with her to hold her hand as they laid side by side and shoulder to shoulder; someone who would whisper to her and stroke her hair and tell her it was going to be all right. Humphrey was a good cuddler, but a dog was not quite the same as a husband.

She sighed and got up. In the kitchen she poured herself two fingers of whiskey. "What the fuck," she muttered, and poured two more. Her liver was the least of her worries now. She took her drink and the bottle out to the deck and stared at the black expanse of her yard.

She hadn't said anything to the boys after all. It was too much to wrap her own mind around yet, much less explain to someone else. Proms, graduations, college, jobs, wives, children—how could she leave them to the business of life without her there to bear witness? How could she leave them the business of life when she still had so much of it left in her?

Angela slammed back the whiskey, felt it flame down her throat, welcoming the heat. Terminal. What an awful word. As the whiskey loosened her muscles, she let the twins, the divorce, even that damn sinkhole fall away. She'd always wanted it all, never content with what was behind door number one when she could have a bit of doors number two and three, too. She had loved Donnie, sure, but the simple fact was he was never enough. She loved the twins with all she had, but they were not her. She didn't fall into the abyss of motherhood—darker and deeper than the

hole in her yard—the way her friends did. She needed more. The taste of a new lover’s tongue and the electric fizz of his hands; sunsets over the Grand Tetons; leaning into a curve at eighty miles an hour on a two-lane road, a bike humming beneath her.

And sooner or later someone would bring up making a bucket list, she just knew it. The whole idea was so ghoulish and defeatist and *terminal*—her whole damn life was her bucket list. Eighty or ninety years spinning out from birth in a constant hum of experience like a song building verse by verse by verse. All of it, more of it. There wasn't a way to parse a life—her life—into a series of events or Make a Wish adventures. Every damn breath was an adventure to be lived, experienced, and she wanted them all to savor, not some frenzied rush to beat a deadline.

Hmph. Deadline. That’s what she had now, a line drawn between life and death, her with one foot almost over. Doors slamming shut up and down the line, doors she’d never see behind.

Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit. She stumbled into the kitchen, the toe of her ratty slipper catching on the threshold, where the boys were already eating breakfast. She caught Ash slide his eyes to the bottle of Maker’s Mark now half gone on the counter. Donnie used to do the same thi—wait.

“Ash?” She crossed to the table in three quick strides and took his chin in her hand. Both of them grinned up at her like little boys caught in the act. She turned his head from side to side. It was absolutely Ash, she could see the scar in his eyebrow from stitches when he was three, the tiny mole by his right ear. “What? I

don't understand."

"It's just gone," he said.

His skin was as clear as Griffin's now, as clear as her own, light freckles on his nose and cheekbones, but no zits, not even any scars.

"I don't understand," she said again.

"He woke up like that," Griffin said, "swear to God." He launched into a passable Beyonce and put his plate in the sink.

"Scout's honor." Ash looked so proud her heart surged.

"But *how*?"

Ash brought his hands together in front of his chest as if praying. "The sinkhole accepted the sacrifice of a toad," he intoned, and both boys broke out laughing. "Who cares how? Kiss my butt, Proactiv!"

They clattered out of the kitchen toward their bikes and school, leaving Angela stunned and hungover.

She sank into a chair and stared at the door. Humphrey snuffled around her feet and then sank with a whuff under her chair.

The toad and the sinkhole. Surely not. Angela shifted, blinked. How was that even possible? But acne that bad didn't just disappear overnight, right? Right. But to think the toad or the frog or whatever it had been had something to do with it, or the hole itself did, was ridiculous. Right? This wasn't a Stephen King novel in her yard. It was a sinkhole, a natural (albeit weird) occurrence. Look at Siberia, for Pete's sake. They were popping up all over there.

But if—just saying if—feeding a little toad to that chasm out there could cure acne, could something bigger cure cancer?



Something like a dog?

It was eating her brain. There was no other explanation for even having that thought. She stood up and poured a slug of Maker's Mark into a coffee mug.

Her eyes strayed to Humphrey asleep under the chair. It wouldn't hurt. He wouldn't know what had happened. He was getting so old, too, maybe it would be a blessing, a blessing that worked for them both. She knocked back the drink, poured one more, knocked it back too, and went to find better shoes.

When the kids got home from school, Angela was on the back porch, rocking in the old porch swing Donnie put up when they first moved in. Back when he'd done home improvements and she'd done grateful; before the affairs, the Maker's Mark, that frantic need to know it all, the sum of human experience down to the smallest detail.

"Hey, boys." She knew she looked like shit warmed over. She hadn't showered or changed out of her bathrobe, and she had a full mug of Maker's Mark in her lap.

"Ma?" Griffin looked her over and shook his head, and she tamped down the rage she always felt when Donnie had done the same thing. She needed to be bereaved, believed.

She wiped her nose on her terry cloth sleeve. "It's Humphrey. I let him out and the phone rang and I came inside and ..." She hiccupped. Fucking Maker's Mark. "I shouldn't have let him stay out alone."

Ash looked at her, looked at the sinkhole. "He fell in?"

She nodded miserably and hiccupped again.

The strobing in her eye had stopped almost immediately, and her head didn't ache. Well, not before she started back in on the whiskey, anyway. But the right side of her body was still weak, so much weaker than the left side, and her vision hadn't cleared at all. She knew without having to see Dr. Gonzales that it wasn't over. Better, sure, but not over.

Poor Humphrey.

Math for dinner: three large pizzas from the gourmet place down the street and two large Xanax crushed into one tall glass of root beer. She didn't know what the solution was yet.

These boys didn't know about life. They didn't understand what a gift it was. How could they miss what they didn't yet know?

Griffin, freshly showered, had on his new shirt, the emerald green Polo she bought him on the twins' birthday. Ash, on the other hand, still smelled like the kennels where he volunteered after school. Griffin ready to go out, Ash ready to stay in. Her boys.

If only there were another way. But there wasn't one, not one with her future anything but an empty void as black as the pit in her yard.

"Mom?" Griffin put a plate with two pieces of pizza on it by her chair. "Earth to Mom, come in, Mom."

"Sorry." She kissed him on the cheek and set both glasses down in the middle of the table. She had spun the wheel—let Fate decide.

The boys sat and inhaled a whole pizza between them in what seemed like five minutes. Ash drained his glass and refilled it, then topped off Griffin's. Angela

couldn't do more than pick at her pizza as she waited.

It was like slow-motion, or maybe a movie montage, she wasn't sure which. Seconds impressed themselves on her retina and were gone, replaced minutes later by something entirely unrelated. Ash, cramming an entire pizza crust in his mouth at once. Griffin, sliding his plate off the table into the trash. Ash again, pouring more root beer into Griffin's glass. Then—

Griffin yawned hugely. "Man, I'm tired. I might stay home tonight."

"Apparently you need more than fifteen hours' sleep a day," Ash snorted.

A sudden pressure wrapped her chest. Griffin then. There was relief there, too, though, mixed with guilt.

Ash stood up and tossed his paper plate in the trash, then wavered. "I'm kinda tired too, actually." He rubbed his eyes.

"You probably got more exercise today at the kennels than you realize," she heard herself say. "Go on to bed."

Griffin rinsed out the glasses and set them in the sink. "All right, I'm out. See you in the morning." He kissed her head.

"Wait, I thought you were staying in."

"Nah. I'm good." He grinned. "Must be a second wind. I'll be at Lesley's."

He disappeared in seconds.

It was Ash. Her Ash.

He was almost to the steps when she called him back. "Come sit on the patio with me. It's a gorgeous night."

"I'm really tired, Mom. I'm going to go to bed." He rubbed at his eyes like the

toddler she could still picture behind that almost-grown face.

"Come on, Ash, how often do you get to spend time with your old ma?" She grinned at him, her hand over his on the bannister, tugging lightly.

He turned and trudged to the open patio door. "Want another root beer?" she asked.

"Nah, I'm good." He started to settle in one of the chairs, but she tugged his hand again, drew him out into the yard.

They stood at the edge of the hole. He weaved a little, his face pointed up toward the stars, away from the open wound at his feet. "Poor Humphrey," he said.

She nodded. "I know. I don't think he suffered, though." She paused and looked at the stars for a second with him, as if she didn't want to look at the crater before them either. A shooting star streaked overhead, bright and then gone almost before she could blink. "Look!" She pointed and his head followed her arm, wobbling unsteadily on its stem. "Ash. You know I love you, right?"

"God, yeah, Ma. I love you too."

"If I needed help, you would help me, wouldn't you. You're such a good kid."

He looked at her and she hesitated, a split second of infinite space.

"You've always been my favorite," she whispered, her hands pressed lightly to his chest.

Suddenly there was air and space where he'd been. His body dropped, his heavy limbs pulling him down, his bone-white face accelerating out of sight, then nothing at all.