

## And Then We All Go to Heaven

On the day that Ann Shearer is to leave for her twenty-year high school reunion, her son Jack's gerbil dies. Jack asks her where rodents (specifically Hamsterface, as they called the gerbil) go after you bury them in the backyard with a pile of cedar chips for a headstone.

"Someday, even the universe will die," she says. "All the molecules will become far enough apart that they can't form any new stars, and all the old stars will die, and the universe will just get colder and darker and colder and darker. It's the end of the circle of life. It's the heat death of the universe."

Jack is eight.

"Heaven," Jack's father, Matt, says. "Hamsterface went to Heaven."

"He's eight now. He can handle the truth," Ann says. She pinches Jack's earlobe. "Bye, sport. I'll be back after I flirt with all my old boyfriends."

She does not, however, have any old boyfriends. All the swagger and appeal she now possesses came only after she'd graduated—years after—when she'd gotten away from the people who knew her, when she'd gotten away from who she was, when she'd had the freedom to become someone else.

She hasn't visited her hometown since college, when her parents moved north. This is what she remembers: Bermuda grass spiking into her calves, cul-de-sacs curling into themselves, and shopping centers pretending to be what they weren't (medieval villages, French villas, the Parthenon). Everyone thought the architecture was "interesting" and "unique," but once you went inside, it was all pretty much the same.

Ann wonders whether, at the first night's cocktail party, she'll say, "I'm an astrophysicist," "I'm an astronomer," "I work professionally with telescopes," or, "I work at a college."

She is already overcome by desire to avoid conversation. Conversation, in these circumstances, is something that gets under your skin and infects you and then kills you, slowly, but not so slowly that you won't have to go to the next night's you're-seated-at-tables-according-to-what-clubs-you-were-in gathering.

The closest Ann ever came to a boyfriend was in eighth grade, when Brandon Kenard started following her around. Brandon played Pop Warner football. Ann didn't—still doesn't—know the meaning of "Pop Warner." Brandon had hair like a plastic doll's and a face like a square-jawed cherub. He wore shirts with brand logos prominently displayed. There was no reason he should have even glanced at Ann's locker, let alone her lime-colored overall shorts, hiked-up backpack, or ground-seeking eyes.

But for a whole month, he attempted to talk to her. He tried to be her sentence diagramming partner. He tried to sit at the band lunch table. He tried to catch her coming out of Algebra I, which he could do, since he was only in Prealgebra.

Ann knew that popular boys only talked to her so that they could say, "Want to go out?" so that she would say, "Yes," so that they could say, "Not," and then go high-five their smooth-calved, prickly-chinned friends.

She never said more than two words at a time to Brandon, lest she set herself up for a joke, or as one. Brandon, however, continued to swagger beside her between classes. When he looked at her eyes (not "in" or "into," since those prepositions would have required her participation), he looked like a different person. Perhaps because Ann only saw him peripherally.

Then one day, everything changed, in the way that everything can when you are fourteen and all things are connected and dire. Pulling one string seems to cause all the others to dance in a way you didn't think they could, let alone would, but that's only because you can't see that the dancing is actually a swift unraveling.

It was a Tuesday in gym class. They were studying volleyball, and Ann was on Brandon's team because he had picked her, first, because he was team captain. Despite the way his clean-muscled friends yelled their own names at him (shouts of "John! Dude!" and "C'mon, man, it's me—Ryan!"), Brandon made Ann's name ring out like a tapped champagne glass.

She missed every ball that flew near ("At," she thought. "They're flying at me.") her. But that wasn't the memorable part of the day. That happened every day, with every kind of ball from basket to tennis to tether. The memorable part was when Brandon's shorts split as he bent to serve. Everyone saw his smiley-face boxers. Everyone pointed. Everyone laughed.

Ann had always thought that Brandon would be immune to that kind of thing, to embarrassment in general. It had seemed to her that if you were high on the totem pole, nothing, not a strong wind or a good shake or torn clothing, could knock you off. But Brandon's neck grew blood lines, and he stood up slowly, as if he were old and tired and unsure whether he'd even be able to stand at all.

He walked over to Ann, his eyes looking like they'd been polished, and he said, "Would you walk behind me to the locker room?"

*I am his best friend right now*, she thought.

And the whole world became a new place, shiny and like it had opened up and maybe there was no world hunger and maybe people, at least somewhere, loved each other and maybe grass was green everywhere, not just over there by the tennis courts.

But how could she have thought that, given how quick people turned on each other once

they saw what was underneath?

“It’s okay, Brandon,” she said, one more word than she’d ever said to him. “I know how you feel.”

He never spoke to her again. She couldn’t mourn, because then she’d have needed to admit that she’d fallen for it.

“It’s time to move on,” said Katrina Martin, her closest friend.

Once she is in the hotel, early as always, she almost forgets about her present life, feeling like she has never in fact grown up. Maybe she is the person she was when she was fourteen, fifteen, eighteen. This hotel, which she has never been in before, is a place and a person and a thing and an idea that she doesn’t want to be seen with. But she already paid the deposit, and if she went home she would have to tell Matt that she left because she felt like she’d never married him or gotten a job.

She wonders if Brandon Kenard will be here, if he has offspring or gotten fat or invested successfully in a line of athletic socks. But she probably wouldn’t recognize him, and he wouldn’t want to reminisce. Pop Warners aren’t usually much for retrospection.

“Ann?” a woman says at Ann when Ann is walking around the Hilton’s Grand Ballroom B trying to find a penumbra to hide in. “Ann Shearer?”

Ann turns and sees Katrina. Because she has never been able to forget, she also sees the time in twelfth grade, right before she left for college, when Katrina said, “Promise me that you won’t make another friend as good as me,” when she replied, “I can’t promise that.”

Katrina blew up photographs—Ann and Katrina at Disney, Ann and Katrina at Suburban Lanes Bowling Centre, Ann and Katrina at Castle Grounds Smoothie Palace, their heads always

pressed together to fit in the frame—and mailed them to Ann’s dorm room, along with a snow globe that housed a city of fairies. Katrina fucking loved fairies.

When the package arrived, Ann showed it to her roommate, her new best friend, the one she discussed capital-L Life with after 2 a.m.

Ann said: “So I had this best friend in high school, right? But she was just the best that was around, not the real best. And now she’s basically stalking me. She sends me pictures. Can you believe that?”

The roommate said: “It’s time for you to move on.”

Ann and the roommate dropped the snow globe out the window of their third-floor room. It smashed like the ground was a bullet shot through it. Looking down at the decapitated fairies and their broken homes, Ann saw the wreckage sparkle like winking eyes. Magical, horrible eyes that Morsed, “I know. I’ll tell,” at their defenestrator.

“I think Katrina would be very hurt right now,” said Ann, who had regretted letting go as soon as she actually did.

But even if she’d jumped right after the snow globe, she would still have been too late. She would have only cut her broken legs on the glass, and those cuts would have become infected with whatever bacteria lived in snow-water, because gravitational acceleration is the same for everything. It’s like birthdays: if you start out older than someone, they can never catch up to you. If you start out different, you stay that way.

The roommate said, “Then maybe people who live in glass houses shouldn’t send other people snow globes.”

“Katrina,” Ann says to the woman who stands in front of her in a red-carpeted ballroom in the Hilton in Oviedo in a petunia-patterned skirt in the 95-degree weather. “Thank you so

much for that snow globe.”

Katrina looks down at her blouse and lifts her eyebrows. She has wrinkles. “What snow globe?” she says.

“The one you gave me right after graduation,” Ann says. “The one with the fairy world inside.”

“I don’t remember a world like that,” Katrina says. “You must be thinking of someone else. Another friend, maybe.”

Right before Ann left for school, she and Katrina spent significant time at the pool inside Athenian Gardens Apartments’ gates. Katrina was the only person Ann had ever known who lived in an apartment.

They sat next to the water, and then they got in the water and stood there, and then they got out and sat again.

“Entertain me,” Katrina said one day. “I’m bored. Tell me a story.”

“Once upon a time—”

“Cliché.”

“—two beavers were walking around a forest when they happened upon a nest of winged insects that each had seventeen eyes—”

“Disgusting.”

“—that opened and closed independently.”

“This is not funny. ‘Entertain’ means ‘funny,’” said Katrina. “Imagine how uninteresting you’re going to be after you go to college and can only talk about what you did for homework before you got so drunk.”

Later, Ann would just stop answering her phone. She would just never write back. She

would just pretend there had never been a Katrina, or an Oviedo, or a Ann, or anything but a dorm room filled with milk-crate furniture.

“Look,” Ann said. “It’s not my fault that you’re staying here.” She stood, feeling slimy, like the sunscreen was a meniscus covering her whole body, a concave layer pressing in on her from all sides.

“I’ve got a new friend,” Katrina said. “She lives downstairs. My mom knows her mom. Her name is Laura. She’s older. She’s got brown hair. She’s not boring.”

Using a towel to wipe the same patch of skin over and over and over, as if what was wrong could come out, Ann said, “I have to go pack.”

Once she was gone, there would be no catching her.

“So how are you?” asks Ann. “What have you been up to?”

“I have a family,” Katrina says.

“So do I,” says Ann. “A kid, a husband, a dead gerbil.”

“I have four sons.” Katrina smiles with only the corners of her mouth—nothing else, not even her wrinkles.

“Been busy,” Ann says. “Huh.”

Other people are beginning to appear, five pounds lighter than they were a month ago and wearing JC Penney’s best dressy-casual. Ann tries not to notice them. She is determined, this time, not to find a friend better than this one. Since Ann didn’t really have any besides Katrina, this restriction seems feasible.

In truth, Ann never found Katrina very interesting. It’s possible that she finds her even less interesting now, with her sure penchant for house-cleaning and speeding to soccer games, maybe even Pop Warner games. Ann just feels so goddamn guilty that she willingly,

purposefully, actively loosened her fingers, dropped Katrina, and said, “I don’t care what happens or if you hit the bottom.”

“So what do you do?” asks Ann. She leans against the potted palm tree, cavalier in a way she only learned in college.

“I have a family,” says Katrina.

“That’s great,” says Ann. “Really, truly great.”

As far as Ann knew, Katrina had never had any dreams, at least not according to Ann’s definition. Ann had known since age four that she wanted to be an astronomer. When she looked up at the night sky, she felt like she was falling, despite the fact that gravity prohibited it.

She knew that she wanted to fall up there, by whatever means necessary. Telescopes, endless hours analyzing pixels on a screen, matrix manipulation—these were the adult ways she found to tether herself to the stars. They were not as exciting as she’d imagined when she said she would build a spaceship and go there, just go away and never come back, but they were still an escape.

“What do you want to do when we graduate?” she asked Katrina when they were fifteen.

“I don’t know,” Katrina said. “I think I’d just like to stay around here, have a decent job, find someone to share my life with.”

“Cool,” said Ann, knowing that this friendship, this “here,” would never be enough for her. Stasis and stability and sameness seemed alien to her. Katrina seemed alien. She couldn’t wait to be untied, “be” being the key verb, since she did feel, though she didn’t tell anyone, like Katrina was holding her.

“Want to take a walk?” asked Katrina.

“I think I’m just going to go home,” said Ann. “I have a lot of work to do.”

“What do you do?” asks Katrina.

“It’s kind of boring,” says Ann. She tears a frond from the palm tree. Maybe someone from the hotel, someone official, will tell her she has to leave.

“That seems doubtful,” says Katrina.

“I guess I sort of work in a college astronomy building.” She puts the end of the frond in her mouth. Bites it. Wonders if it is poisonous. “But having a family is great, too.”

“I know,” Katrina says. “It’s just like you always wanted.”

“It’s all just great.” Ann smiles, hoping that Katrina will, too, even if it’s just unconscious mirroring.

Though she knows that everything in the universe is fated to get farther and farther apart, Ann wishes that just once, just on this local scale, the rules would break.

On the first day of high school, Ann wore a blue pair of linen pants, a two-shades-lighter T-shirt, and a jean vest. It was all loose-fitting because it had not yet occurred to Ann that people dress for the eyes of others, or to reveal what’s inside, whether that be personality or breasts or both.

She liked the way the blues matched but not exactly. She thought the outfit, like her self, was complicated.

When she got to school, Katrina (wearing something too plain to be offensive to any clique) said, “Are you wearing that to school?”

“We’re at school,” said Ann.

“I’m going to come over tomorrow morning and help you,” Katrina said. “I don’t know if you know this, but your goal here is to be invisible.”

Ann imagined herself going through her day undetectable. Light would not reflect off her skin into people's eyes, but would fly straight through her. All colors and shapes were really just due to combinations of reflection and absorption. If we didn't change the paths of light rays, it would be almost like we weren't there at all, if being is dependent on being seen.

A boy sauntered up to Ann. He had products in his hair. "Hey, aren't you from Jackson Middle School?" he said.

"Yes," Ann said, acutely aware of her non-invisibility.

"I thought girls from there were supposed to be sexy," he said, pinching a button on her vest. "Do you know any sexy girls from your school who like juniors? I'm a junior."

Ann just stared at him, giving no indication that she'd even heard him, because perhaps if she didn't hear him, he hadn't spoken. She put one of her loafered feet on top of the other.

"Have a nice day, asshole," he said.

When he left, Ann turned to Katrina. "Why didn't you help me?" she asked. "You're like my only friend, and you just stood there."

"I was invisible," said Katrina. "See? It works."

They have turned the music on now, so that the reuniterers have a predictable beat to which they can pick up their nametags, register, be officially recognized. The music is music from twenty years ago. The music is loud like they are in a bar, suggesting that no one actually wants to talk to anyone else.

"So who's the lucky guy?" Ann yells, cupping her hands around her mouth.

Katrina doesn't seem to expend vocal effort, having become expert at projecting her voice over four (four) boys. "Isn't it weird that we used to be so close, and now you don't even know who my husband is?"

“I’m sorry,” Ann says, but her voice is lost in the lyrics.

“There’s no use in trying,” says Katrina, who still seems not to be straining. “It’s too loud.”

They stare at each other for a few seconds, blinking.

“Would you like to dance?” Ann shouts.

“Not really,” Katrina says.

Ann attempts to recall her husband, their courtship, their child—but she can barely remember their names. She can’t imagine living at their house and going to her job at the university and standing in front of students who believe she is an authority figure and even sometimes flirting with them and then coming home and telling Matt about it.

She tries to picture Matt, but all she sees is a generic male body with a censor-blurred face, as if he is not allowed to be seen here.

Perhaps she has fallen into a wormhole. Perhaps this is a loop in the time-space continuum. Perhaps it is even a parallel universe.

Or maybe she is dead, and this is Purgatory, which she doesn’t usually believe in, but does right now, further proving that she is not herself. Maybe she exists in a quantum state—simultaneously one thing and its opposite, till you look at her and she appears to be a single, definitive thing, a thing that is determined by the fact of your observation.

Hamsterface, she remembers, is the name of the gerbil. This name does not reflect reality. She wishes the gerbil were alive. She wonders if, when he was alive, he hated being called something he wasn’t, if it made him feel like a hamster. Hamsterface, how cruel.

“I married Brandon Kenard,” Katrina says. “He’s here somewhere.”

Ann searches the room for a large-necked, Dockers-decked man, which is what she imagines all former football players become. She sees none, but a lithe man—lithe like Brandon never was, not even before growth hormones—bounds toward them like a Labrador.

“Ann?” Brandon says when he arrives. His body barely contains his energy, like there are tiny strings vibrating just beneath his surface, straining to burst forth like a million Jacks-in-the-box.

It is strange to her when someone here—here, the past, a stuck-time place—says her name. She doesn’t feel like “Ann” is her name anymore. It sounds different, like maybe it’s “Kayren” or “Carron” or “Carin”—similar, derivative, but definitely not the same word Matt and Jack say at night before dreams, or during, or the word the dean calls when he chases her down the hallway, asking her to join another diversity committee.

“Who me?” she wants to say. “I’m someone else. You’re looking for someone else.”

Ann is afraid that if people in her real life knew more about her past, they would no longer see her: She would disappear, obscured by her previous incarnation. Superimposed upon, in the same way that she feels, now, sixteen and angsty. Like she does when she visits her parents on Christmas and they won’t let her drive because they can only see the Ann who just couldn’t understand four-way stops, and she whines and says, “But Mom,” where “Mom” has two syllables, despite the fact that Daughter holds a tenure-track teaching position.

Ann thinks of ages zero to eighteen as “her other life,” but that’s not true: it’s all a single life, it’s all just her. This *was* is who she is, underneath the cover slip sewn of confidence, advanced degrees, and aerodynamic salon-grade haircuts.

She recalls broken glass three stories below her, fairies dismembered and fractional. Though smashed, they were still evidence.

“Brandon,” Ann says. “Hi.”

She wonders if his name said in her voice sounds different to him, too, if it bounces off his cochlea in an unfamiliar way, a way it hasn't sounded since he could only grow pieces of a beard.

Their life—the life of the Kenards, which is what they both are now—is unimaginable to her. In Katrina's life, if a gerbil dies, that is the most important thing that happens all day. Ann's life puts things in perspective for her. She sees everything on a cosmic scale, because when she leaves the house she does things like discover galaxies and map star formation forty million light-years away. To Janet, a house is a universe, and what occurs within the shout-blasted walls is not just all that matters, but all that exists.

Katrina reaches for Brandon's hand, and Ann feels a jealousy she knows is unreasonable.

"I swore I would never speak to you again," Katrina says. "After you left, it was clear that everything we had meant nothing to you."

Brandon says, "Katrina," the same Katrina that he goes to bed with each night.

"The past doesn't matter," Ann says, and she is not sure which way she means it: One moves on from the past, leaving it behind; one learns from the past and forgives and forgets. Maybe she means both. Maybe she is indecisive. Maybe she is confused.

"I didn't even like fairies," Katrina says. "I just thought that you liked that you thought I did."

Ann wonders what it all means, if it all means anything. She realizes that this thinking is abstract, general, juvenile in its unstudied nihilism. But in forty-eight hours she will leave this town; she will leave Katrina and Brandon; Katrina and Brandon will leave her. Nothing will be left of their encounter but the memories of light that reflected between them, the sense that their sound waves disturbed the air, although they would never, if they later tried, come to a consensus about the frequency or amplitude of that disturbance.

“Everything is relative,” Ann mumbles.

“I think what Katrina means is that you hurt her,” Brandon says.

Ann looks outside at the suburban sprawl. Sunlight pierces it like a shot. Right outside this window are a castle and the Parthenon and Cape Cod and Europe—the whole world, really. Inside everything, though, just space either filled or waiting to be.

Ann wants to say something to Katrina and Brandon. Something important, something profound. Something that will fix all the things that she is not sure are wrong.

All she can think about is how gravity makes everything in the universe pull toward every other thing in the universe. Even if the things are small and distant and insignificant, there is always a little tension keeping them together, like the tiniest strings.

When we die, Ann knows, we will disintegrate. Then the Sun will die, and the Earth will be engulfed, and then the Earth will be forgotten. Everything we’ve spent our lives caring about will become part of the heavens, and we will make new stars, all of us, and then those stars will die, for as long as the universe can keep it up. And even when it can’t, our particles won’t cease to exist.

Maybe in fifty billion years, an atom of Ann will collide, in the cold, dark universe, with an atom of Katrina, or Brandon. There’s no telling what they will become, since there will be no one around to see it, no light to be shed.

How to say all of this, though, is unclear.

The music quiets down so the class president can welcome them all back.