

I. June 18th, 1992

To know Ramona, is to know both Heaven and Hell unequivocally. We met in the Summer of '92 at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. She lay stretched out beneath a Weeping Willow tree on a faded checkered blanket, her long black hair resting gently on the grass just beyond the frayed edges. I watched as she twirled a dandelion between her fingers. I was mesmerized by the way the tiny butter hued triangles of sunlight danced across her body through the trees when the wind blew. I had, unceremoniously, given up on the idea of finding someone I could see myself sharing a bed with forever.

“I promise I am much nicer up close” she called over to me, once she had noticed me staring, “and you...I’m hoping, make a better conversationalist than a statue.”

She laughed.

I wandered closer. squinting off into the distance and pretending to be uninterested so as to conceal my thudding heart which beat recklessly within my chest.

“You do speak...don’t you?” She asked, giggling.

I said nothing.

“Leave it to me to find the one cute man in all of New York City, and he doesn’t speak!”

She teased, throwing her arms up “Well, I suppose that’s better for me, because

I can talk all day”.

“Sorry, I wasn’t staring at you. If it seemed like I was, I wasn’t.” I inched closer and stood at the edge of her blanket casting a shadow over her to shield her from the rising sun. Afraid I might say something stupid, I gave a hard tug on one of the Willow branches, intending to pull it clean off of the tree. I had planned to pluck the leaves off of it to make a whip, as I had done so many times in my childhood. In my mind, it snapped off without much effort and I appeared strong and mysterious. Instead, the branch ricocheted back up, refusing to break. Tiny droplets of rain leftover from the last night’s storm fell on her.

She laughed. “I’m all wet! And we just met. A shower is a bit ambitious, don’t you think?”

“I..I’m I’m...so sorry! I didn’t mean to...you know...I was, I was just trying to...”

“It’s okay” she said, holding up her hand “I was kidding. Relax. Most people don’t know this place like I do. This isn’t any ordinary Weeping Willow Tree” She reached up and tugged gently on a branch hanging overhead, rubbing the shiny green leaves between her fingers tenderly “It’s a Japanese Weeping Cherry Tree. In the springtime, it blossoms with beautiful pink and white flowers and when the wind blows, it sometimes looks like it’s snowing. Tiny pink and white petals dance to the ground. It’s lovely.” She sighed, I watched her eyelashes flutter. Her eyes were a warm honey brown that reminded me of the caramel sauce my grandmother used to make.

“By the way, what’s your name Rainman?”

“It’s Dan.” my voice stuttered and caught somewhere in my throat, “You?” “Ramona”
She said, rising to a sitting position “Romona Talentino”

From that moment on, if you had asked me if I believed in Heaven, I would have said
“Yes”. I would have shown you this beautiful woman who smoked cigars with me, and always
knew the right thing to say to pull me out of a shitty mood. I would have told you about how we
spent our days lounging in bed, sweaty and breathless, taking turns flipping a coin to see who
answered the door for the delivery Chinese food.

Nights spent wandering the city talking about things most people are afraid to say, like “I’m
afraid that without you, I won’t remember how to breathe, and If I do remember, I’m scared that
I won’t want to”. In the beginning, we felt unstoppable.

To say our life together was perfect, would be a lie. Ramona’s unwillingness to give up
smoking was a battle we fought daily, but never really had the time to fight. Time is a cruel
bastard that slows down for no one. Those first six years sped by. It was as if we had climbed
onto one of those rusty old red metal Merry-Go-Rounds you find on playgrounds, running as fast
as we could and then jumping on with both feet. Together through those years we hung on,
grinning and laughing like idiots. A blur of birthdays where one of us always drank too much,
Uncle Frank’s wedding during Hurricane Charles, a furious symphony of wind and rain which
ended with dancing under a clear sky once the storm had passed. Our life was a paradise of
collisions.

Nothing was perfect, but yet, everything was. That is, until everything changed.

The birth of our daughter Sara was blissful and terrifying for both of us. Ramona, who had sworn she never wanted children because she was too afraid that she couldn't have them, fell instantly in love with the screaming red, slimy and adorable being that she had birthed. We both did. Ramona's black hair, matted against her forehead, her eyes smiling and exhausted. It was in that moment that we both vowed to fiercely protect her, no matter what.

II. November 7th, 1998

For Sara's nine month birthday, we decided to take her to Walt Disney World. Ramona had succumbed to my insistence to always dress her in pink Disney princess outfits. At parties people would laugh, amused with the idea that I had picked out her outfit for that day. Everyone insisted that Sara was still too young to appreciate a trip to Disney, but we just couldn't wait. We wanted her to meet Mickey Mouse, see the Teacups ride go round and round, wanted her to watch the fireworks in Magic Kingdom and take a picture in front of Space Mountain, a ride we promised each other she would love when she's older.

Nothing could have prepared us for what happened next. It had been the first night of our vacation to Disney World, we were staying in The Swan and Dolphin Hotel, on the tenth floor. I had gone out to pick up our Park tickets for the next day, and Ramona had stayed behind to put

Sara to bed. The view from the tiny balcony was beautiful, and the hot August weather made it the perfect night to enjoy the sound of the Cicadas and watch the cars go by in the distance.

Sara loved to dance, and each night before bed, we liked to dance around her bedroom with her, twirling and laughing, she loved it. That night, they had been dancing on the balcony, Ramona was singing to her. Sara got excited and kicked. Ramona lost her grip. In the twilight of the evening, her hands were suddenly empty. Seconds past, filled with the horror of hearing the thud and crack of each flower pot breaking as they were struck, one by one, piercing the otherwise quiet night. Ramona always stops there, unable to say what happened next, and it doesn't really matter because I know what happened next.

That night was filled with strangers in uniforms, EMTs, police, doctors. I remember throwing away the flowers and the movie I had gotten, for a quiet night in.

The movie was rented, but I didn't care.

The image of Ramona, bent over the sidewalk that night, gripping her sides and wailing from somewhere deep within, the kind of awful cry that makes your stomach hurt just listening to it. I remember watching Ramona cry this awful cry, I watched as this dark thing took up residence within her, I pictured it as an awful black bird, its wings shaking and shrugging, rubbing up against the walls of her ribs, tearing through her guts like an angry vulture.

We rode in the ambulance to the hospital. Sara looked so small beneath the tangle of tubes and wires. The sirens blared loudly. I looked for something to hold onto, but found only

Ramona, a hunched over collection of nouns. Eyes, Ears, Blood, Bones, Sweater, Shoes. Nothing about her seemed familiar or recognizable in that moment. I crossed and gripped onto my own arms instead, as if trying to keep my innards from falling out or falling apart. The pungent smell of Isopropyl Alcohol the only thing keeping me present to the growing horror around me.

At the hospital, they reassessed Sara's current condition and delicately told us to say our goodbyes. I walked into that room with nothing but the memory of how to put one foot in front of the other. Into a room that was too big, too sterile, too harsh for my little girl. I braved the demon of seeing her body resting on a cold, metal table. The overhead light cast harsh irregular shapes and shadows on her perfect little face. She could be sleeping, I remember telling myself. She looked as if she was asleep. *How does a father say goodbye to his only daughter?* I'm still asking myself this question to this day. I kissed her cold forehead, gently lifted her tiny fingers beneath two of my own fingers, her arm moved with my movement alone. "I'll be seeing you, sweet girl".

When I left the room, the only sound I could hear was the hollow beeping of lonely machines intimately familiar with the dying bodies they were attached to. Upon seeing me, the mood of the staff changed from that of concern and sympathy to pity and disgust. I had emerged from that room baptised into a new identity. A child who loses a parent is called an Orphan. A husband or wife that loses their spouse is called a Widow.

There is no word for a parent who loses a child.

We had descended the ladder of parenthood to that of daughterless mother and daughterless father. We were then ushered into another room and handed flyers about support groups and phone numbers to call to arrange the funeral. As we left the hospital, I couldn't help but feel like I was being followed. Ramona hung back a few paces, shuffling her feet forward between sobs that sounded more like a dog barking than a woman crying.

For the two weeks after Sara's death, Ramona tortured both of us by cooking foods that she would make for Sara. Plain breaded dinosaurs that tasted like stale cardboard, boiled green beans that fell apart in your mouth, and tiny cubes of cheese and broccoli spread across the stark white dinner plates like the aftermath of a battle. After those two weeks, I tried to take over cooking. I cooked filet mignon wrapped in bacon, Chilean Sea Bass with a thyme-rosemary sauce, and Shrimp Scampi in Chardonnay and butter. But she wouldn't eat any of it. After that, we both stopped cooking entirely. We ate nothing but take-out food, mostly tacos and cheeseburgers.

Even then, Ramona only ate a few bites.

At night, she cries that horrible guttural cry, and I imagine the sinister black bird in her, stirring, stretching its awful wings as her body quakes in my arms. I wanted someone to blame. Sometimes, when I comforted her at night and we lay in the dark half under the faded striped

quilt her mother gave us, I pictured her as a scaly monster. Her wails becoming strange and deep. I wanted to let go of her, of this large mass shuddering in my arms, but I can't, knowing that trying to explain this to my wife would be more awful than comforting the beast. When the sobbing stops, she looks at me in the dark, and sometimes, I think I see a beak. A hard black pointy beak and stray shadowy feathers that peek painfully up from the tender skin around her eyes. The image is so grotesque that I usually spend the rest of the night walking through the empty streets of our neighborhood.

On nights like these, sometimes Ramona will wait up for me. I would find her staring at the rocking chair in the living room, absently fingering a pair of white baby socks, or sleeping over the arm of the couch. Her fingernails dug into the maroon fabric, tense, even in sleep.

Once, I found her sitting, alert in the darkness of the coming dawn, hugging her knees to her chest. She wanted to talk. We sat together in the dark for a long time. Neither of us saying what needed to be said. In the changing light, as the shadows and shapes of morning filled the room, her eyes began to morph, to play tricks on my eyes. Her pupils dilated and flickering, like the eyes of a crocodile. That night I hated her, hated her for the things I used to love, like the way her lower lip juts out further than her upper lip, and the way she bites the inside of her cheeks when she is searching for something to say, the way she clears her throat when she's nervous.

“I just can't stop seeing her face as she...” she whispered.

“I know, I know. It’s okay. It wasn’t your fault” I had become so used to saying this that I no longer knew if I believed it myself.

“But what if it was? These newspaper articles” she said, motioning to the pile of crumpled newspaper articles that lay in a pile in her lap “they have me pegged as a murderous woman who wanted her child to die, for what? To be rid of responsibility? I..I don’t know. Just thinking about it makes me want to scream!... They don’t understand. She SLIPPED, you know how strong she is....What mother would...” Ramona stared down at her hands, frowning, then viciously picked at the skin around her thumb until it bled. “Why did you choose that awful hotel anyway?” she mumbled.

“You have always loved the Swan and Dolphin hotel...besides, why are you reading those again? We are old news, it was last year, people have moved on. No one is blaming you, no one except yourself”

“If you had worked harder, we would have been able to afford staying at the Grand Floridian like we had talked about and....” she growled.

“Oh, no you don’t. Don’t turn this around on me. You want to talk about blame? We can talk about blame”.

Ramona said nothing. The sound of our Cuckoo Clock broke the silence.

”Oh David, how did this happen to us? What did we ever do to deserve this?”

“Ramona, that’s a dangerous game to play and you know it.”

“But we are good people. We donate money to the Salvation Army every Christmas and we don’t lie on our taxes like other people do...I just ...Damn it, I would give up everything I have, just to have her back”

“You are going to drive yourself crazy with that kind of talk. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. End of story. You know this...Just look at your Aunt Ruth. Did she deserve to have breast cancer? No. Or Kelly Tolberth, did she deserve to fall off that ledge while hiking and break her leg? NO. So cut that shit out. You don’t get to do that”

“It isn’t the same.”

“Oh? But isn’t it though? That’s life, Ramona.” I dug my fingernails into the palm of my hand to keep from strangling her. “ I can’t take it anymore with this self pity...pull yourself together! It’s been over a year!! How long is it going to take? I can’t always be strong for the both of us. I need you to TRY! Hell, PRETEND IF YOU HAVE TO”

“Stop yelling at me!” she wailed. “I AM trying!”

“I’m NOT YELLING!....” I took a deep breath and watched the corner of her eye twitch her eyelashes flutter furiously.. “I’m sorry....this is hard for me too.” I admitted.

As the months staggered by, I found distance between me and the moments the grief bird took her. Changed rooms when her face turned red and puffy, as she hunched over the sink determined and gagging as she shoveled and scarfed mouthfuls of Cottage Cheese and Okra, foods we both knew she hated, but ate to punish herself. Times when soft yellow light flooded the door frame of the bathroom, and I knew she was crying on the floor.

III. Tuesday

Rolling over, I found a hard plastic baby doll between Ramona and I. Its arms were outstretched, almost touching my forehead. The doll's glassy eyes fixed blankly on mine. It was wearing a purple polka dotted dress that had belonged to Sara. The dress hung loosely over one shoulder, engulfing the small doll in a tangle of fabric. Ramona's hand rested on the baby doll's side. I felt sick to my stomach. Behind the doll, I could see Ramona. Even though she was asleep, her eyes twitched and fluttered, puffy and red from crying. I was beginning to think that they would stay that way forever.

Ramona stirred briefly as I climbed out of the bed. I wanted to wake her, but had nothing to say. I held my breath as I walked down the hallway, past Sara's room. I practiced counting each stair as I descended, past lonely nails, the dust still clinging to the pale walls in crooked rectangles. Every few steps, was a picture of Ramona's sister's family or Ramona's parents. My family's photos never made the cut, Ramona had convinced herself that they hated her. I felt a hard knot in the top of my throat. We had talked about taking them all down, but Ramona insisted we needed reminders that we are never truly alone.

The kitchen was still mostly dark, I didn't bother to turn the lights on. I began to make coffee, just to keep my hands busy. I lost my taste for the stuff last winter, when my doctors explained *Coffee for an insomniac is like gasoline on a fire*. This was followed by a lecture on the importance of sleep and a doling out of prescriptions that made me feel like I was walking

around in someone else's skin. The insomnia lasted nearly five months, and when I could finally sleep the night through, coffee just didn't taste the same anymore. Still, the sputtering and hissing of the coffee maker was oddly comforting and the habit of drinking it was familiar.

Taking my mug to the backyard, I sat on the deck steps. The new baby gate lay discarded beneath the tomato plants. Red and yellow leaves littered the backyard, damp from yesterday's rain. I looked at the mug in my hand. It had a teddy bear on it, holding a heart that said "I Love You Berry Much". Ramona had given it to me on my first Father's Day as a gift "from Sara". A horrible lump began forming in my throat again, bit by bit, gripping my esophagus in an uncomfortable tightness.

Sometimes we do things without thinking. Nights when I can't bare the idea of listening to Ramona's cavernous weeping, I sleep on the couch. The television is a welcome distraction. Tuesday night I saw a commercial for hair removal cream, a woman in a shower was smiling and laughing, showing how easy it is to apply. She had long wavy blonde hair and freckles that reminded me of my college girlfriend, Charlotte Kimble. Without thinking, I grabbed the phone and I dialed her number from memory. It rang.

"Hello? This is Charlotte" Her breathy voice immediately brought me back to my college years.

I hadn't expected her to answer. *Shit. Shit. Think of Something.*

"uh, 1-800-FLOWERS" I said quickly.

"Flowers? I didn't order any flowers...I think you have the wrong number"

“No. No, I, um, It says right here....”

“Daniel? Is that you?”

“Daniel....I don’t, my name’s...”

“It is you! I would know that voice anywhere! How’ve you been stranger? I was just thinking about you the other day. How strange. How the heck are you?!”

“I, I’m good.” Another lie. ‘I’m doin’ alright. How about you self?’ *Get it together, shithead!*

“I’m great.” she paused “Things are just great.”

Maybe I wasn’t the only one lying. “Hey, well that’s great to hear...Do you ever visit the old stomping grounds anymore?”

“I haven’t been back for a couple years. Life has just been so, well you know.”

She sighed “I got this whole big house to myself now.”

“Did your father move out?”

“No.. no. He passed away....Oh dammit, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t...you, I’m sorry. I heard about your daughter. A terrible. Really. Just awful...If I had been *her mother*...I don’t know what I would’ve done with myself...”

“Stop. It’s fine. Really. We don’t have to talk about it. Tell me about...your trip to Hawaii, didn’t you go there last year? I hear it’s really nice. Johnny, you remember him? He told me you’re friends with his wife and she mentioned you were going.”

“Someone been keeping tabs on me? You know...” she said coyly, “ You’re the one that decided to up and marry the next person you found after we dated, not me...”She sighed slowly, “But really, Hawaii...It was amazing. You should come sometime, I’m moving there once I’m done packing up this old place” She chuckled softly, I could tell from the way her breath sounded, that she was smiling.

“Oh Charlotte...” I whispered.

“I miss you” she said, so faintly I questioned whether I had heard it or not.

“I should go. It’s late. Sorry. I would love to keep talking...”

“Oh alright...wait, before you go-do you remember that cafe we used to eat at, Cromwells?

“How could I forget?” I chuckled nervously, keeping my eyes on the stairs.

“Well, I’m due for a visit up North. I could use a break from sorting through all these stuffy boxes in the basement here, it can wait. How about we meet for lunch there, on Thursday?”

She wanted to have lunch. I listened to myself answer, intrigued, but unalarmed that I sounded like a stranger. This confident man was laughing, agreeing and *playing it cool*. That was the first time I reached into the other side of hell and found life. Her phone call was like remembering to breathe. The rest of the day, I saw more light than shadows.

Charlotte and I had lunch at Cromwell's Bistro, that following Thursday. I can still see her, as she rounded the corner in that yellow and red sundress. For a second, it was as if we were still madly in love, in college. She strolled up to me, and touched my cheek playfully. *How've ya been?* She hadn't changed a bit. Together we walked into the restaurant and chose a spot by the window. Outside bright golden Sunflowers bloomed against the window, their petals pressed the glass, as if they were looking in. Beyond the flowers, we could see the park. An elderly couple walking a small white puppy, pigeons scrambling for scraps of bread thrown by a girl in a pink sweater, and the fierce, quiet trees preparing for winter.

Charlotte spoke about her family, her new love of painting, and the gritty, beautiful beaches of Oahu, where she was planning to move. I nodded in all the right places, but what I really thought about was the soft skin beneath her ear, the tender slope that leads down her neck to her collarbone, and then finally to her breasts. In my mind, I was traveling the familiar path to blinding pleasure, feeding the hunger for *more*.

She asked me a question. I asked her to repeat it. She wanted to know if I would go away with her, move to Oahu and live on her late father's pineapple plantation, sip Negroni on the beach. *It'll be unreal*. She kept saying. *I'm married*. My throat tightened over the word "married" but I said it nonetheless. *I know*. She said. What followed was several minutes of her saying how sorry she was that my daughter had died but statistically couples that suffer a loss usually do not survive the storm. Then she asked the one question I asked myself over and over that night, *What's left for you here?*

Sharing a bed with the tumorous bird living in my wife. Fast food and long walks alone.

Hugging the monster at night. She slid a plane ticket across the table. I thought about it for a long moment, then I took it.

After I finished my coffee in the Berry mug, I thought about all of this. I thought about Ramona, and Charlotte. I thought about Sara. As I put my mug into the sink, balancing it carefully on plates crusted over with hardened ketchup, and foggy water glasses clustered together, forgotten. I went upstairs to pack. Ramona lay still sleeping, gripping that small plastic doll in our daughter's dress. I took out a suitcase, emptied all of my clothes from the drawers into it, before carrying it down the hall, holding my breath as I passed her room. I checked my coat for my keys, before pulling a pair of jeans from the suitcase on. Leaving the house, I checked my reflection in the mirror briefly. My eyes searched for the pockets of light, memory of happiness, but instead saw the peppered reflection of a man who had not shaven in four months, two tired eyes, faded and dull like weathered rocks from the ocean, and the trembling lips of a man who was about to leave his wife, the wife who killed his daughter, even though it wasn't her fault.

Once in the car, I turned on the heat and waited for the thin layer of ice on the windshield to melt. The November sun bathed the car in a too bright yellow light but offered no warmth. As I pulled out of the driveway, I thought about Oahu and pineapples, Charlotte and Negronis. I thought about the other side of Hell. What lay beyond the shadowy prison of crying all the time and the shudders of grief? Then I thought about Ramona and Sara. I thought about the baby gate

on the deck. I thought about the shades of light our bedroom turns when the sun comes up. I drove past the exit, I drove circles around town until my fingers hurt from gripping the steering wheel, until my eyes blurred in the blinding afternoon sun of the passing day, cars began turning on their headlights. As I turned into the airport, I was stopped at a light. I saw two black Crows sitting on a fence. It was then I felt the shuddering of wings within my own chest. I imagined the black feathers stirring, as the bird awakened.

I sat at the light. Left to go to the airport. Right to go home. The soft ding of my turn signal quietly reminding me to make a decision. I watched those two black Crows shake the morning dew off of their wings. Cawing quietly as each black feather stretched and shook. Then, unceremoniously they took flight into the open sky. I watched as they flew into the distance, through dense, puffy clouds, streams of white light penetrating the darkest parts. Watched until they were gone. Nothing may ever be easy again, but in that moment, I choose. As the light turned green, I began to drive.