

Daughter

The man was in the barber's chair halfway through a haircut when he saw the missed calls and read the text. He was up and out the door and in his car and gunning his way up the highway on-ramp before he noticed he was wearing, still wearing, the cutting cape the barber had clipped around his neck.

At the hospital check-in the young girl looked at him funny, the first of many looks to come. His hair was completely shaven, the beginnings of a skin fade, on most of his left side, while the rest of his head was the waves of salt and pepper the barber hadn't gotten to.

Down the hall and in the room. His wife was crying, caressing Lilly's head. It seemed strange that his wife was not the patient, not the one helplessly lying there, a shell of herself. Twice she had been. So much younger then, beyond broken. Two losses. Unimaginable late-term losses. Two daughters whose lives were mere minutes long. The aftermath: twice she filled with milk—twice in seven months—without a child to feed it to, without the answers, a reason as to why—*why* couldn't she hold to term? All seemed lost till Lilly. Fourteen years of Lilly. Fourteen years of joy that neither she nor he believed they'd ever feel again. Now it was Lilly lying there. Another child to say goodbye to. The man began to cry as he took his wife in his arms. "I can't believe this day is here," he said. Together they approached her and bent to Lilly's level. She lay on her side, fighting, it seemed, to keep her eyes from closing, from leaving the world just yet. The man rubbed and kissed her the places he often did (behind the ears, on the nose); the woman did the same (beneath her chin, on her mouth). "Watch over us,

Lillehammer.” “Tell your sisters we’ll love them forever.” These were the final words, his and hers.

At the barbershop the next morning, the man returned the cutting cape, paid for the haircut, and explained what had happened. All three barbers told him they were sorry to hear. The lone customer, an older, mostly bald-headed guy whose Vietnam Vet hat was hooked on the coat rack beside the register, said he’d been through this himself not so long ago. “There’s nothing worse,” he said. “Took it harder than I did my brother’s passing.” After the laughs, the barber who’d been cutting the man’s hair the day before told him to sit down, to let him finish the haircut; the man declined, though, and waved goodbye and headed towards the door that jingled when it opened.

On the park bench the man and his wife sipped their coffees. Looking out at the fields where they’d bring their Lilly and unclick her leash and let her run free to fetch for tennis balls, they talked now, reminisced, went through highlight after highlight of their life with Lilly. The songs they sang. The games they played. The trips they didn’t take—didn’t want to take—since Lilly couldn’t be there. “We had a toddler for fourteen years,” the woman said, laughing, crying. The urn of ashes sat between them. When they were ready, they’d scatter them and thank her and thank her and cry and tell her how she saved their lives.