

## SHOT WITH LIGHT

He didn't die.

How could my cousin—my boy cousin—my only boy cousin (me a girl with no brother) die?

So we had a big party. Well, big as far as little goes. It's a small family.

Isn't it the amount of noise that counts? Or maybe the quality of the quiet. I am never quite sure how that goes.

Right, like there's anything to be sure of. Which is exactly why we get so black-and-white, so brick-head stubborn, so set like stone, 'cause we're afraid that if we give even an inch, it will be like some kind of screaming avalanche into total chaos. Or something. Don't worry, I am just talking about my family.

The family that seems to have me pegged as like the Big Hope for the Future of the Bennetts Near and Far. Ha. Basically, all that means is I am maybe the only one still in the running. My sisters tied at two kids each. Dad slowing, not the spark anymore. Pretty much the whole grandparent generation gone, uncles drinking, aunts mostly on the outs with each other, a couple of cousins lost, off the map. I don't want to get into that.

So this is the kicker: just because I can be loud, just because I say what I think and maybe I've got the words to usually make it pretty damn clear, I am suddenly not only your little messenger from one camp to the other, the official spokesperson, but now apparently I am also the one they have randomly decided will Go Somewhere.

Sure. I so do not get the connection. If anything, it is Charles who has always been the kind of shining star.

Walking down this drizzly beach of family reunion, I am remembering when I was really little, when we used to visit Auntie Ev—July or rich ripe August—and I would look like I was drawing my endless Happy Family pictures but actually half the time I was peeking out from under my lashes at Cousin Charles, spying on him, studying every move. I guess it's probably true that he drove his sister crazy, that he never stopped teasing my older sisters, (okay, maybe he was always bugging me too), but all I could see was how big and smart he was, how he was the absolute master of spitting and that weird bicycle trick and staying underwater for way longer than any other kid at the whole lake, how he was good at everything in the world.

How come Cousin Ruth got to be so lucky, having a brother all year? I was always thinking about what it would be like. Not just somebody else who's heard all of Dad's dum-dum jokes a million times too, somebody who knows exactly what I mean about Mom's 'don't you *dare*...' look, but then he would teach me how to do boy stuff, and keep my sisters from picking on me, and punch me on the arm and tell me everything is cool in a way that would make me know it was true...

Karen and Melissa would go, "Stop your blubbering, Cath!", "Hey, you're fine—it's all good," and I was like, "No, it's *not*." It has got to be totally different to hear it from a big brother. I mean, just his grin, and all is well.

My third birthday: forget the cake, forget the stupid dolls—I'm watching Charles juggle five bean bags, wink at me and send a boomerang V'ing back into his own outstretched hand. And by the time I am crazy excited about going into First Grade? He

has already tried to teach me every single thing there is to know about fishes, rocks, baseball, leprechauns, how to mount stamps, how to find dinosaur tracks, how to make pennies shiny, how to make them disappear. Not easy in annual installments, but then this is Cousin Superman.

All right, looking back, maybe things wouldn't have held up quite so well in the 24/7 in-your-face day to day. Ruth says he was meaner than anything to her. Listen, I don't want to hear about it—perfect, or pretty close, is the part I came away with.

Well, okay, that is a whole other subject, this 'perfection' stuff. It has taken me about twenty years to see how I have always been totally setting myself up: god forbid I finish something and it's not 'just so', god forbid I should be wrong, god forbid I deviate two inches from all the stuff I think I should be accomplishing, what I should *be*. I can't remember who brought the perfection problem to my attention, but it was like a shock wave. No wonder I had started feeling like some sort of ghost, floating but not going anywhere at all; inconclusive. Duh.

Charles' son Miles? He already gets this at age nine. Right now he has me captive audience in a back bedroom of the cottage.

"Close your eyes," he says, and pulls the blinds down, rattles around with some kind of contraption. "Now *keep* them closed." Never mind any 'Auntie Cathy'; he's the one in charge here. "Okay, now open them and look over this way."

The turntable of the old orange-and-white record player is adorned with marbles, a pine cone and, circling the center, a rubber snake.

"Now. Stare at the marbles. They are—going—around—in a circle. Keep staring at them. Just *be*."

His little voice gets deeper, slower. “Just watch the marbles and just Be. You don’t have to *do* anything.”

Wow, that’s got me squirming for a minute.

“There is no wrong way of doing this.”

Holy. How the heck does he know about the ‘being perfect’ shit?

“Relax, and just—be. Everything is happening exactly the way it should.”

I seriously am maybe starting to relax but I still want to know where he gets this stuff from, anyway.

“Re—lax...”

As I do, it feels almost like stretching into some place I maybe used to know about, maybe even used to live in.

Suddenly he flips the RPM’s to 78, and marbles fly pinging off the closet door and under the unmade bed. I am distraught. I continue to watch the snake.

Then the pinecone gets a good kick from an approaching aggie and sails off the turntable right into my lap.

I feel like I have been shot with light.

“See?” Miles says. “Everything always happens the way it should.”

And his brother is all video games and NFL. I don’t get it.

To be honest, I don’t totally get this let’s-not-talk-about-why reunion, either—or at least I’m not really sure how it is going to work; *if* it is. My other girl cousin is the only one who wants to do some kind of ceremony thing for Charles. Obviously my sisters are rolling their eyes, thinking that’s completely Twilight Zone/out there. To me? It’s enough of a ceremony just getting all these crazy people together in one place to begin with.

It gives me a headache thinking about the logistics—the number of hot dogs and tofu burgers and buns; the kids who have to have *that* kind of mustard and then of course the ones who *hate* that kind; the one Great-Aunt saying how there's far too much commotion and ruckus and she knew she never should have let her daughter convince her to come in the first place; the wet bathing suits on counter and bed and underfoot; the whole fourth-generation gang (all boys except for one don't-mess-with-me girl) getting their second wind about midnight and up at 7AM even so, whooping right into the icy lake before cereal in front of some fuzzy black-and-white cartoon; the bathroom that is like absolutely never free...

I could go on. I would like to go on. I do not want to get (ever) to the other part—the part about Charles' supposed diagnosis, the part about how long he will live. I may be the family loudmouth, the one Bennett who has always got an answer but that is actually because I don't. And wish to god I did. Because here's the other part: to this day, I believe that people are good and that they should be rewarded for this, and that basically, bottom line, we are all hardwired to live happily and ever after. And if I see anything that looks like evidence to the contrary, it is kind of like my job to drown it out.

Confronted with the tangible, the fact that Charles needs help to walk now, I find more dishes to do, am conveniently besieged by nephews wanting to tell me the same knock-knock jokes as yesterday, decide I need another swim myself, right *now*. It's starting to rain again? The oldest boy swears he saw forked lightning exactly at the same time as the thunder, right about where I would be flipping around to butterfly back? Whatever. Give me wind and water and waves.

I really don't know where to go with this. Somewhere along the line in my perfection-plagued life, I started believing in miracles. My throat closes up. And Charles? We. Are. Still. Waiting. I don't know about everybody else but I am getting pretty frantic—please do not tell me that this apparent absence of a miracle (so far!) is because of something Charles isn't doing right. Or *me*. I am getting more confused by the minute. I so do not know what to say to him. Or me.

Day Three, and I am heading out to the float again, letting Karen or Melissa feed him because now his arms are getting too tired, too weak. *Feed* him? I lose my rhythm, catch a mouthful of water. But Charles was the chef of the family! Even better than Auntie Ev, who is awesome. This is so wrong.

And then I am swimming back, and, talk about wrong, there is that voice inside me again. 'They might be feeding him, but *me*, *I'm* the one who truly loves him'; 'Or maybe they love him, but nobody else understands him the way I do. It's like I'm the one who is his *real* cousin, his—' I don't even dare say it. 'Sister.' What is my problem?

Tomorrow now, we will be going, back to South Carolina and Connecticut, Colorado and British Columbia and Florida and Maine. It takes me all day but finally I get some courage together and now I am sitting next to him in the lawn chair looking out at the rain-pocked lake, the slippery-as-hell dock, at my naked niece with her Laura Ingalls Wilder sunbonnet, and I manage to breathe something about how I see us all growing old together.

And Charles doesn't say anything, nothing at all, which makes me stumble into this moment of shock—there was supposed to be some kind of All-is-Well answer!—and so then I wimp out again (how can I get us on safe ground?) and make this funny little

laugh that sounds like my mother when she is trying to change the subject, and I say, “That Miles is such a character!”, and then, I don’t even know why, “Remember how I used to throw every single stuffed animal out of my crib and how you would always pick them all up for me?”

Charles smiles, gathers his air. “So I guess it’s—my—fault you’re the spoiled—baby of all spoiled—babies!”

“Yeah, right,” I sputter, but I am almost in tears that he can still tease me. What did I think, that my real Charles wasn’t in this shorting-out body any more? That he was any different because he maybe couldn’t shoot a basket or make his famous potato salad?

‘I just can’t get my mind around this,’ I want to tell him; ‘it doesn’t compute.’ Because it doesn’t. I am getting dangerously close to the ‘It’s Not Fair’. And I so do not want to go there because—well, because I have always been such a Just Somehow Make it Work kind of person, and one thing I still refuse to admit is that there is some part of me that is always quetching, always sighing in frustration, always asking why.

All right, fine, a part that is always mad. Yes. What I really am is screaming-boiling-hot tears-wailing to the vengeful gods wrathfully *mad* that my cousin—my boy cousin—my only boy cousin is now being made immobile. I want to shake him, want to shake the whole damn freaking world.

Auntie Ev goes by with an armful of lettuce, waves two fingers at us. If I am not saying much about her, if I have been acting like she is not even here (when actually she is doing everything, teaching us Grampie’s old Swedish meatball recipe, tying Miles’ shoelaces up again, making sure my Dad’s got enough iced tea, repeating how lucky we are like some kind of backwards knock-on-wood), it is because I can’t even look in her

eyes; because I don't want to know what it could be like, what it is like, don't want to know.

He doesn't die, you know. The story doesn't end that way. It's not a story.

You would think it was me who has to struggle, pull up air to share the smallest thought. I feel so helpless, so totally and completely unhelpful. So lost. Maybe it *is* my sisters, offering him their forkfuls of salmon, those bites of bagel, who prove that they're the proper cousins. And me the Bennett idiot, the one who *cares* in stupid staring silence, the one who makes it even worse for him. For me.

Charles slowly lifts one finger and points. The sun emerging from banks and caverns of clouds for its God's Country setting, painting the boys down at water's edge with their bucket of one small frog, the girl (patting and smoothing herself into a shifting bed of sand)—painting them all golden.

Smiling, swallowing hard, I tell Charles about the record player and the marbles, the pinecone and the snake.

"Milesisspecial," he says. "He's—gonnabe—some—thing—important."

"You too!" I cry, the words just coming out.

And somehow it absolutely is the right thing I said. Because it feels like he just relaxes into the chair and into the perfect evening and into something bigger that we might not ever figure out, and you know what, it doesn't even matter.

I'm not sure I am totally convinced about this 'Everything always happens the way it should'. But I am holding Charles' hand while we watch the kids backlit by golden twilight, by diamond-crested waves, and I'm good with the 'Just be...'