

Passage

Marcus calls them my crying jags. They're getting embarrassing, he says. He's more embarrassed than I am, which makes me cry more, seeing that when it happens in public everyone sort of shifts sideways, away not from just me but from him, looking at him like it's his fault. It doesn't happen every day. It's more like four times a week, lately. Yesterday I went for a long drive alone and when I came home Marcus had cleaned the entire house, everything in its place, even mopped the floor and lined up all of Franklin's little pairs of shoes by the back door, and this seemed so gorgeous of him that I started up all over again.

"For heaven's sake," Marcus hissed, looking up the stairs to Franklin's room, gesturing up with one hand in annoyance and another towards me in concern.

"I know, I know," I told him, and hid under the covers while he made lasagna. He cooks dinner like he's making some kind of concession to me and my madness, but I think Marcus actually cooks the way that I cry, like it's in deference to a higher power, with bowing and candles. I think he feels cleaner after he's made a good meal.

We are all happier when we sit down to eat. I don't know what Franklin does up in his room that makes him feel absolved, but he is as placated and content as we are, all of us feeling like we've just gone on an invigorating hike through the cold and built up a hearty appetite. I'm always hungry after one of my crying spells. There's a kind of wholesome aching that comes with it, a contracting of my side muscles and the long heaving of breath that makes me feel both feral and strong, like I'm pulling a boat through water.

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It's not really the big things that set me off. Wars abroad, a mass shooting in a mall, a mudslide that buries a village, a coastline shaken into the sea—when I hear about these things I hold them in my mind, turn them over, and then discard them into a pile of evidence which tells me daily that the world is going to shit. I don't lose it out of pessimism, is what I'm saying. That would be gratuitous, I think.

Let me be clear. I haven't always been like this. I'm forty-two years old, and for most of my adult life I never cried at all. I used to think I wasn't able to. Back at my law firm in New York, I was too busy for it anyway. My back hurt constantly and I always had trouble sleeping, but now it seems that I'm making a clean exchange of two maladies. Perhaps I've just been stockpiling my crying for years. I like to think it was stored in my back. Since it started, I haven't taken an Advil or had trouble sleeping — not once.

The first time, I cried so long and so hard that Marcus took me to the hospital. He buckled Franklin, sedate and aloof, into the backseat, and then buckled me into the passenger side. I was wailing so hard I couldn't make a sound, couldn't lift my arms, couldn't shake my head yes or no. I just sort of convulsed in these long, anguished waves. It was something like giving birth.

"Why's Mom crying?" Franklin asked, trying to sit up as tall as possible.

Marcus didn't answer as he backed out of the driveway. Then he mustered, "She's sad, kiddo."

Franklin stretched his neck until he could see my face in the rearview mirror. "Oh," he said, settling back down into his seat. "I get sad sometimes."

At the hospital they gave me sedatives and put me on an IV. The doctor, scowling, quizzed Marcus about head traumas and mood disorders while a nurse with a pinched face examined me for signs of abuse. When Marcus realized what she was doing, he growled, "Find anything?" and she dropped my limp arm and said, primly, "Not yet."

I cannot explain — I still cannot explain — to my husband what happened to me the first time. I could tell him, but he would misunderstand, he would think it was a different kind of grief. Maybe seven months earlier, my period had been two weeks late. I figured it was something menopausal, and when my next period came right on schedule, and the next, every twenty-nine days like it has since I was fourteen, I figured it was only a fluke, nothing to worry about, and it wasn't until several months later, at the end of summer, washing the dishes after dinner, that I realized that I'd had a miscarriage and started to cry.

It wasn't that I'd wanted another child. Marcus and I were in long-term ambivalence about that. It was that I'd wanted to know, during those short weeks, that I'd held something else inside of me.

It was that I'd gone on charging about my own life. It was that I had missed it.

* * *

And then my Franklin comes home from an early autumn afternoon in the first grade and announces, on the way up to his room, that he should have been born a girl, and this, too, makes me lose it. Marcus is horrified, both by the announcement and by my reaction to it. If Marcus were a wailing type I think he'd resort to it now, begging me to stop so we could figure out how to deal with this, our little wildling. As if it weren't hard enough that he's the sole biracial kid in all of fucking northern New Hampshire.

I don't actually think Franklin's a girl. Or, I guess, I don't care if he is. I blame his kindergarten teacher for botching a simple game last spring: What animal would you be if you could? Somehow the kids, but particularly Franklin, heard her say what animal *should* you be, and Franklin came home and told us that he *should* have been a bear. He refused to get up off all fours for an entire week, and even at the dinner table adopted an ursine slouch, crouched back on his haunches and flopping his hands like heavy paws.

I cry when he says these things not just because I'm ashamed that my son might have been a girl all along and we never noticed, but also because I'm in awe of his certainty. I can't remember ever knowing, ever truly knowing, any one certain thing about myself. But Franklin knows all things. When he was three, already preternaturally well-spoken and prone to his rambling narratives, he would toddle through the rooms of our house declaring what existed: "You are my mother. This is a chair. This is my truck. This is a small truck, not a big truck. I cannot drive it."

"Maybe he is really a changeling," Marcus says, trying to get me to smile, which works even though my face is still wet with tears. We made up that joke years ago to counter the assumption, unless you saw us together, that Franklin wasn't ours. Franklin is such a perfect—an absolutely perfect—blend of Marcus and me that he actually looks like neither of us. When we first moved up here, people at the daycare always thought Marcus was too black to be Franklin's father and me too white to be his mother.

"Maybe we should trade him in," I sniff. "Maybe there's a family back in Park Slope who wants to swap."

"Let's get a redhead this time," Marcus says, "a real carrot-y redhead."

When I still don't stop, he pulls me down onto the couch and stays there with his arms around me, and I bury my head in his chest. "Do you think we should try a doctor again?" he asks. "Or maybe a therapist?"

"I miss New York," I tell him. "We weren't freaks in New York."

"Honey," he says, kissing me, "you're a freak anywhere."

I shake my head. "I could cry in New York. I could cry *in public* in New York."

"Right," he says, "but you never did." He strokes my hair. "Maybe we should try going to church."

That gets me to stop. "Why?"

"Well. Maybe like a conduit, you know, for these things you're feeling, like an appropriate space, so you can cry in public." He must feel, somehow, that I'm leaning away from him, from the idea of church, my ingrained resistance to the droning of the faithful. He dislikes it—or he says he does—as much as I do. He laughs a little at my stiffness. "Church doesn't have to be sacred. It can just be safe. There's nothing wrong with being part of a community."

"On a schedule? Every Sunday at ten?" This has always been my argument, over the years, when my mother has tried to get me to go to church, that I resent how ordered it is, how rigid. But you *like* order, my mother protests: what you resent is chaos.

"Would you prefer not to schedule it?" Marcus angles his body and cricks his neck so that he can see me. He suspects. "Tell me—do you *like* crying?"

Here's the thing: I really, really do.

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We sit down to dinner watching Franklin carefully for the aftershock of his announcement. He eats with characteristic somber bites, as if he has to make his peace with each bit of food before he can consume it. I'm surprised he doesn't talk to it, the way he talks to almost everything else.

"Hey, little man," Marcus says, spooning peas onto his plate. I glare at him; he should know better than to make peas. Franklin

eats them one at a time. “When you say you *should* have been born a girl, do you mean you want to *be* a girl?”

Franklin nods without looking up.

Marcus gets flustered. He pulls his chair up to the table and settles his elbows down on either side of his plate. He looks at me for help, but I’m no use, and besides, like I said, I don’t really care if Franklin is a girl.

“Okay,” Marcus says, nodding, “what do you think it means to be a girl?”

Franklin spikes one pea on his fork and frowns at it until it’s in his mouth and swallows before answering, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world: “Girls don’t have to play sports if they don’t want to. They don’t push each other at recess. They’re really smart at school.”

Marcus, I can tell, is so relieved he’s not sure whether it’s appropriate to laugh. He shovels food by the mouthful. “Yeah, buddy, you know what? That sounds pretty good to me, too.”

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But of course that’s not the end of it. Of course the next day Mrs. Hughes calls to tell me that Franklin and little Ingrid Merritt were found back behind the dumpsters on the blacktop—an area that is strictly *forbidden*, as though the offense were in playing out of bounds—swapping clothes. Franklin, apparently, was shrugging his way into Ingrid’s dress when the parent on recess duty (and of course it was Mrs. Merritt, Ingrid’s mother) found them. When Mrs. Merritt demanded to know what her daughter was doing, Ingrid, confused, explained that they were switching boy-girl. “So that I get to be a boy.”

Mrs. Hughes asks me to come in for a conference that afternoon. For a minute I think about lying and telling her I’m at work and could it wait. The truth is I haven’t had a job since we moved up here three years ago for Marcus’s job at the nature conservancy. We’d had a tacit deal that I’d start looking when Franklin started first grade, which meant two months ago. But that was before all the crying.

“It’s important for me to say,” Mrs. Hughes tells me, “that this isn’t a disciplinary issue. We’d just like to have a *conversation* about the best way to support Franklin.” I have an image of her leaning

over a teacher handbook that reads in block letters EMPHASIZE CONVERSATION. I wonder if they have a special section for gender-bending six-year-olds. I agree to come in, but call Marcus immediately.

"Maybe I should go," Marcus says. I know he's thinking I'll fall apart at the conference, and I might. I can see myself, sobbing in front of Mrs. Hughes as she explains that little boys don't wear dresses, and then Mrs. Hughes picking up a cartoon phone marked CPS to report me as unstable, and the thought of this makes me cry. "You there?" Marcus asks. "Jesus. I'm getting in the car now. We'll go together, okay?"

It takes me a half-hour on the couch to pull myself together, and another to make myself look presentable. The conference is in fifteen minutes.

In the parking lot, I pause to straighten my skirt. I don't know why I dressed up like a businesswoman, except maybe to convince Mrs. Hughes that I'm not a complete nutjob. I look for Marcus's car, but it's not in the lot. I feel bad—the watershed job has him driving all over the county, and I didn't think to ask how long it would take him to get here. Buses are pulling up in front of the school, and I have to duck between them to get to the front door. I raise my hand in a thanks-for-not-running-me-over gesture, and I see one of the drivers roll his eyes.

The bell rings just as I open the door to Franklin's classroom, and inside there's the rumble of twenty-five six-year-olds scrambling for their backpacks. Mrs. Hughes waves me over.

"I'm sorry," I say, "am I early?"

"No, no," she says, stacking a mess of pages that all read TODAY IS FRIDAY in questionable scrawls. "You're right on time."

A small hand fits itself into mine and I look down at Franklin's frowning, upturned face. "Hi, Mom," he says. "How are you feeling today?"

Strange little son of mine. I crouch down and pull him into a hug, and he puts his arms around my neck.

"Ingrid's mom got mad at me," he whispers. "Because I tried to wear Ingrid's dress."

Through his curls, I can still smell that raw, babyish sweetness from when he was a newborn. I don't know if I'm imagining it. "I know, sweets," I say. "That's why I'm here. I'm talking with Mrs. Hughes about it."

"Are you mad at me?" he asks, still burying his face close to my ear. He sounds less upset than curious.

"Not a bit." Sanguine, he settles himself at his table across the room, pulling out his crayons and bending over a half-completed drawing. Around me kids are scrambling into their coats and shouting at each other. I can't remember which one is Ingrid.

"Hi-ii," a voice croons near me, and I turn to see the woman I seem to remember as Ingrid's mother. She is one of those milque-toast, sugar-spun blondes that I've made a practice of disdaining, and, verging on blond myself, have a perpetual fear of being mistaken for one. "I'm Carol—" she says, reaching out to touch my shoulder.

"Yes, that's right," I say, "we met on the first day—"

"—Ingrid's mommy," she finishes.

I let out an enormous hiccup, like a cartoon drunk, and she turns her bizarre shoulder stroke into an awkward pat.

"Shall we . . . ?" Mrs. Hughes is hovering on the other side of her desk, halfway between sitting down and standing up.

"Oh, if we could just wait," I say, looking around, and then Marcus puts his head around the door and comes in, dodging first-graders still struggling with their coat zippers and scanning the room not for me but for Franklin. Carol turns around as he joins us and then cranes her neck back to see his face, an affectation designed, I'm sure, to make men feel taller. She also does that thing, that pause people here do when they see Marcus: oh, a black man. It blinds them for a second, as if adjusting to a scar or a limp. They don't do it to Franklin, not yet.

"I'm Marcus," he says, holding out his hand. "Franklin's dad."

"Oh!" she says. "Oh, of course," all smiles. "Carol, Carol Merritt. Franklin is such a sweet boy." Across the room, Franklin is frowning over his crayons, pressing down with furrowed intensity. "And so adorable. He has such pretty, *such* pretty eyes. And that hair."

"We think so," Marcus says amiably, but then he adds, "of course, we did have to pay extra when we bought him off that band of gypsies."

Carol gives him a sickly smile, and I snort, and then cough, and then I have to excuse myself to go out to the hallway and laugh. The corridor empties out and then there's just me, leaning against a bunch of finger paintings and giggling. When Marcus

comes to find me, I can tell he expects me to be crying and he breaks into a sly smile when he sees it's not the case. "I'm sorry," he says. "I shouldn't have."

"I *love* you," I tell him. "I love you so much it hurts. My love for you requires a whole other body to house it—my love for you—" and he nuzzles right up under my arms and lifts me up for a kiss. For a minute, I'm completely unhinged. I hike up my skirt and put my legs around his waist, hoping that Carol will catch us, and finally let him set me down, disappointed.

"Get it together," he scolds, grinning uneasily. I straighten my clothes, and he tucks my hair back behind my ears. When we return to the classroom, Carol has pulled up several chairs to Mrs. Hughes's desk and is expectantly perched on the edge of her seat. A blond girl who must be Ingrid is sitting with Franklin, both in silent and somber work on their drawings.

Marcus and I sit down next to Carol facing Mrs. Hughes's desk, an arrangement that makes me feel like I've been called in to the principal's office.

"Shall we begin?" Mrs. Hughes asks.

"I'm sorry for the delay," I say, and then, because I can't think of any other reason for Marcus and me to be out in the hall, I add, "I haven't been feeling well lately."

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After the conference, Marcus drives home to cook dinner and I drive Franklin to the Walmart by the outlet mall in North Conway. Two outfits, I tell him. Anything he wants. "Dresses, too, Mom?" he asks. Dresses too. Carol Merritt said she didn't mind if Franklin wore dresses as long as they weren't her daughter's, so there, I'll buy him his own.

I'm all nerves waiting for him to try them on. We're in the women's changing room and I'm sitting on a cracked plastic chair jiggling my leg up and down like someone trying not to smoke, and Franklin insists on going into the changing stall alone and refuses to let me help him. He finally comes out in a short-sleeved blue dress with big sunflowers and a navy cardigan. He turns around, looking at his reflection in the smudged three-way mirror.

"I think this is my favorite," he says. "But the dress comes in red, too."

"The blue is nice," I tell him. He purses his lips, considering. "What do you think?"

"I prefer the blue," he decides. He ends up with a pale purple sweater and black capris as well. I offer to let him wear one outfit home and he happily climbs back into the sunflower dress. Even with short hair, his soft curls and long eyelashes give him a soft and feminine look.

"You look pretty," I say.

"Thank you," he says solemnly.

At the checkout, the saleswoman coos over him. "Oh my," she says, "she certainly is cute," and it takes me a minute to realize that Franklin successfully passes for a girl, and then the woman asks, "Is she yours?"

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Marcus is steadily stirring a pot of risotto when we get home, and he's poured about half the bottle of wine into a glass by the stove. He hardly ever drinks. Franklin stands in front of him, bobbing his head shyly. "Hey, Dad," he says, "I got a dress."

"Sure did, kiddo," Marcus says carefully. "Nice."

If it's awfully lukewarm to me, it's high enough praise for Franklin, and he goes running off to his room. Marcus tastes the spoon.

"Hey, there, Mama Bear," he says, in reference, I suppose, to my reaction to Carol Merritt's *it's just very confusing for the other children*, which was *maybe it's educational for your children to meet people unlike themselves and maybe you shouldn't be such a goddamned prude* and which was, I admit, not my finest moment. At least I didn't cry.

"Try this," Marcus says, spooning risotto into my mouth, and while my mouth is full, "Do you want to move back to New York?"

The food is so hot that I just let my jaw hang open and make huffing sounds.

"Because," Marcus answers, "you're not happy here. In New York you could find work. And," with a rueful smile, "you can cry in public."

"This is delicious," I tell him, finally swallowing. We can't go back to New York. I can't raise my son in a place like that. But I'm having trouble, actually, figuring out if there's any perfectly good place to raise my son. "What about your job?" I ask, because he loves it. "What about this house?"

Marcus shakes his head. “Hon,” he says, “these are all things we can change. We don’t need this house. I don’t need this job.”

What he needs is for me to stop crying so much. What he needs is for me not to yell at another parent at the elementary school. What he needs is for me to stop lounging around the house sobbing at the news. He needs me to get a job and be that bright, sardonic and angry woman he married, the one who didn’t act so constantly bereaved. I don’t know how to tell him that that woman is gone. When she left me I felt only relief. I don’t miss her.

“I am happy,” I tell him, and he shakes his head in disbelief.

“It’s not normal,” he says.

“Why does it have to be normal?” I ask him. “Who wants to be normal?”

“I don’t *want* to be normal,” he snaps. “I want you to tell me what it is that *you* want. I want you to tell me what’s going on in your head that you can cry for *three* goddamn hours because a tree came down in a windstorm.”

He’s angrier now than I think I’ve ever seen him. He picks up the wine glass and his hand is trembling so violently that he has to set it back down again. He turns his back to me and turns off the stove. “When did you decide to stop talking to me?”

I am not a woman of great powers of expression. It’s not a lack of linguistic capability but rather the faculty of emotion: I cannot say how often I have been told, from my mother and sister to my dearest friends and ex-boyfriends, that I am cold, that I keep people at a distance. “I don’t know—” I start, then offer, “It’s just that I’m going through something right now.”

Marcus pokes the risotto with a spoon. “It burned!” he says, and to Franklin who has come tripping down the stairs wearing his old jeans and a t-shirt, “You changed.”

Franklin shrugs. “I thought maybe you didn’t like it.”

“Oh, no, little man,” Marcus says, contrite, “of course I liked the dress,” and then, realizing what he has said, blushes, uncertain.

“It’s okay, Dad,” Franklin says, “I like it when you call me little man.”

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When it starts this time, I get the feeling it might not ever stop. One moment I’m buoyant and present, squaring my shoul-

ders, sorting through the affliction with logic, and the next I'm weeping again, at sea, a leaky boat. After dinner I hide under the covers, and an hour goes by before my son climbs in with me. Franklin doesn't think my crying is weird anymore. He squirms to position his little shoulders on the mattress and then raises his hand in the air, tracing with his finger pictures on the ceiling only he can see, and I keep one hand on his head, feeling through his curls a primal heat, something generated specifically between the two of us and no one else. Some people say that they fear less for their children as they grow up, prove themselves able to cope in the world, but it's not like that with me. When he was a newborn I was radiant, calm, secure in his health. It's as he's grown older that I've been terrified he might die. With my hand on his head, he stops squirming. His hand pauses, and he begins to murmur the kinds of things I sometimes hear him say in his sleep, *but this dragon's a friend, don't go down that side of the mountain, get on the swings now, his name is Rex, if you feed him the right kind of cereal he'll teach you to fly, it's magic cereal*. There's a buzzing in my pocket: my mother. The trembling of my cell phone comforts me, even though I don't pick up.

When Marcus wakes me, I realize I've dozed off, still weeping, and Franklin has dutifully remained at my side, watching the ceiling as though he's watching cartoons. He has reached his arm up over mine so that his palm rests on my head in a mirror image of me, each of us feeling each other's primal heat at the top of our heads, like everything rises up and into each other, a thought that brings out a small choking sob in me. Marcus, leaning over me, whispers, "This has to stop."

I reach up and rub my other palm over the top of his head, holding them, husband and son, letting them flow up into me. I don't like that word, *god*, but I do thank whatever powers that be for these two, my husband and son, and whisper to myself little prayers to keep them safe. "I know," I say, and Marcus, without being told, also puts his palm on the crown of my head, and his opposite hand on Franklin, and Franklin, still watching the ceiling, muttering, *see how big his wings are*, duly reaches out to touch his father.

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The woman I used to be, back in New York, was witty and quick. I used to shield myself with language, taking pride in the precision of vocabulary, pedantic with grammar, holding out my acuity with words like some sharply crystalline bauble, a harsh, glittering thing with which to distract from my own true face. But I've lost that, it seems. I seem to have lost not only my edge but all of my edges, become smooth and undecipherable even to myself. I feel porous, as though I am as susceptible to being saturated as I am to being wrung dry. I feel like I'm seeping out into the world.

Who am I if I am not that woman? This new skin I'm in is tender and ineloquent, a wanderer without a map, a pilgrim without a relic. For two nights Marcus and I retire to bed without speaking, fall asleep without touching. Our weekend is filled with errands and leaf-raking in the yard. The days are getting shorter. On the second night he asks me, "Is it okay for me to hope that this dress thing is just a phase?" and I don't reply. In the dark of night I know that he, too, is awake and listening for me; we are listening for the me that speaks, the one with answers, the one who never cries.

I slip out of bed when the sky is tinged with violet-gray, the predawn, go for a drive, windows down, tearing along the Kanca-magus Highway with the cold whipping my hair in my face. The timberline is dense with the burnished tones of autumn, pinned down with the steady green of interspersed pines. The wind carries the scent of woodsmoke, campfires, resin, and moss. After an hour of driving, I'm so cold I can hardly unclench my hands from the wheel, and pull over in Franconia Notch to roll up the windows and crank up the heat until I can feel my fingers again. The sky thickens and contracts overhead, a muscular cloudbank rolling in from the north.

When I hit Twin Mountain I drive around looking for a place to get a cup of coffee, and am distracted by a tiny one-man propeller plane taking off from the airfield. It seems too small, hesitating and struggling in the wind as it bounces along the tarmac, picking up speed. But then it's airborne, banking west and finally disappearing over the horizon. I make a couple passes through town, trying to see where it's gone, but finally concede defeat and pull into the St. Patrick's lot, unsure where to go. A church. Fine, Marcus. I can say I tried it. Inside, I can hear a Mass in progress and sit on the steps instead, leaning up against the walls, made with

stones pulled out of the Ammonoosuc River and still rounded from the years they spent in watery residence. Judging from the cars in the parking lot, the Mass is sparsely attended. I check the schedule; the service ends in ten minutes, another begins in twenty. I'll go, then; I'll sit through an entire service. No one knows me here anyway. From inside the church, a sonorous voice rises and falls, the words obscured, and it comforts me, being outside of it and yet implicated in it. I'm grateful for this front step, the threshold, for allowing me to be neither here nor there.

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Outside of being pregnant, there was only one other time I missed my period. I've never really believed those women who claim that their cycles fluctuate according to outside influences, the idea that our bodies sync and coincide in order to accommodate our friendships and traumas. But once, when I was twenty-nine, I didn't bleed for ten whole weeks. I had just broken things off with Paul, a man I'd met through my work, when he moved back to his hometown in Texas. He was the first person I'd been with who'd taught me just how much being in love could change a person; because he was the first, I thought he was the only. This was three years before I met Marcus. Before Paul, I'd never thought about marriage in a serious way. I'd never planned on a family. But with him, I could fathom it, which surprised everyone, especially me, and then he'd suddenly moved back to a suburb of San Antonio where he'd grown up, claiming to want to settle down back home, raise kids near his folks. For years after, I'd considered the primary betrayal of that relationship not that I'd refused to go with him—he asked me to—but that he'd wanted to go at all, he'd succumbed to this desire other people had, this common little need for home.

And after he moved, my period stopped. I took four boxes of pregnancy tests, all negative. I went to the doctor, convinced the tests were wrong. I begged her for a logical explanation, and she said, "Sometimes these things happen. Have you been under a lot of stress lately?" and I was furious that she couldn't come up with something better, that she was lazily blaming my emotions. Two months went by. I was staying late most nights at the firm, keeping busy, and one night at my desk, I was hunched over my dimly lit computer screen when the janitor came pushing his cart down

the hallway, the radio hanging off the handle. And the song that was playing was a common, sad love song, not even very wise, just plaintive; I remember feeling that I'd been struck right in the gut, and I doubled over, and in the bathroom I bled and cramped like something was dying.

The doctor gave me pamphlets on stress management. I went on about my life, grateful that whatever it was had passed.

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It always amazes me, the tiny hinges on which our lives turn—if I'd gone to Texas, if I'd never met Marcus, if I'd had another baby, if I hadn't given up my job so Marcus could follow his. It amazes me that I, who for so long forswore a husband and family, would find myself so afraid of losing these two beings that I have nearly driven myself mad. It is both the almost-was and could-have-been that stay with me. I did not want another child, and yet I did, selfishly, as some sort of security against the fear of losing Franklin, whose path in this world is marked much more by what he inherited from Marcus than what he inherited from me. The extraordinary luck of my life swells up in me, and I can feel the pulse of tears behind my eyes. I envision myself in the church, weeping, waiting for some kind of revelation, and the truth is, despite my skepticism, what I really want is a moment of divine grace, an opening. I'm ready for it, a solution. I don't want to bewilder Marcus anymore. What I want is to sit among people with their minds on God, and I want to have one last good cry.

But I never get the chance. The murmuring of the Mass rises, the sound of shuffling and the pushing back from the pews, and my phone rings. I answer without really registering the screen, assuming it's Marcus, but it's not. It's my mother.

"You'll never guess where I am," I say, getting up to pace the gravel lot. "At a church. Catholic."

"Don't mess with Catholics," she warns. She doesn't believe me.

"No, no, I think this might be it," I goad. "I've finally found religion."

She sighs. I realize why she's calling. I've missed our scheduled chats for two weeks running. "Can't you find it elsewhere?" she asks. "Don't they have Presbyterians in New Hampshire?"

“Picky,” I say, and she snorts.

As usual, my mother dries me up. She’s been dragging me to church services my whole life, and I’ve been faking illnesses and headaches for years to get out of it. Typical, now, that she takes issue with my methods. Typical of me, too, to flaunt the one sect she really hates, the only religion she’ll unequivocally declare wrong.

“What are you actually doing?” she asks.

I kick at stones. My mother brings something out in me, that dry, brittle woman from New York, always with her guard up. I don’t like that woman. I want to cry, but I’m frightened of what my mother will say, of her blunt, supportive misunderstanding. The doors of the church open and people stand about in little clumps before wandering back to their cars. Finally I say, “I’ve been crying a lot.”

My mother—who for so long has spoken over me, misinterpreted me, and taken offense where none was intended—my mother does something in the silence that follows, something that I cannot remember her doing for many years, even stretching back to my childhood. She hears me. The pause between us takes physical shape. I am housed by it.

“Yes,” she says. “Sometimes we do.”

So much lives in that *we*. My mother, my sister, and I. A sort of inheritance of sorrow, and I remember when I was very small my mother was often red-eyed without explanation. But more than that, more than our tiny bloodline; she is inviting me into the family of motherhood, into the relentless, chaotic current. And she is telling me that it will pass, that joy will take a turn in me, confirming what I already knew, which was the impermanence of the thing, which I can already feel receding.

I never make it into the church. I no longer want to. My mother asks after Franklin and Marcus, and I’m suddenly in a rush to get back to them.

* * *

It takes me more than an hour to get home, windows down again, the sun pushing its way through the clouds, dappling the White Mountains with light and shadow. Inside our house, the kitchen smells of breakfast cooked and gone cold; Marcus has left a plate of pancakes and a glass of orange juice on the table. The

house is quiet, but I can faintly hear Franklin's movement in the bedroom upstairs. He comes down the steps cautiously, looking around. He's wearing the black capris and the lavender sweater.

"Mom," he says, "I have to find Dad."

"Why?" I ask, alarmed, "Where did he go?"

"I don't know," he says. "It's hide-and-seek." He takes my hand and we go into the living room, where it is evident from a glance that Marcus is hiding behind the couch, his head peeking out over the top. But Franklin insists on looking everywhere, narrating softly. "Is he behind the bookcase? No, he's not there. Is he under the table? No, he's not there."

When Franklin opens the coat closet, I look at Marcus, who mouths at me, *where have you been*, and I say, *nowhere*, and he sighs, and I say, *but I'm home now*, and Franklin turns around and Marcus ducks down again.

"Is he behind the couch, Mom?" Franklin asks, and makes a show of craning his neck to look down behind the couch and Marcus stands up.

"Oh, darn it," he says.

"I found you!" Franklin shouts at him, and in a weird throw-back to his three-year-old self, adds, "You're my father, and I found you!"

And then something strange happens. Marcus cries. He doesn't sob, like me, or lose it. He just weeps, and realizing it, starts laughing, wiping away the tears with the palms of his hands. And the strange thing is that I don't want to cry, not at all. What I want is to shout, with my whole being, what my son shouts, to let that rattling voice out; I want to tell them, my family, *I found you! I found you! I found you!*