

one

Winter 2015

I am waiting. Snow falls. Over five feet in February, with a record-setting ninety inches between January 24 and February 15. Lucky for me that during several of those days I was happily soaking up some vitamin D with my boyfriend, Randy, in Puerto Rico. We love it down there, the sun as opposed to snow, but also the ocean, the way we can stare out at where the sky meets the sea. While I was gone, Katie and her boyfriend, Chad, had stayed at my house, since Liam's away at college, in exchange for keeping the driveway and steps shoveled.

But now it's March, and I am the one shoveling. Or trying to. I've put my layers back on. If I don't keep the driveway and stoops cleared of accumulation every few hours, it will ice over and require a pickax to get through. As it is, there's no opening the front door, and if not for the garage door that slides up on a hinge, I would've had to jump out the window and shovel my way back to the buried entrance. Time is not on my side.

I'm hoping that one of the four men who constitute my neighbors

will offer some assistance, because they have two things I don't. They all have snow blowers, and they all have wives looking out the windows, warm and toasty in their houses, patiently waiting for them. I know I should go over to one of them and ask for help, but goddamn it, I shouldn't need to. What is wrong with the people in this small town northeast of Boston? Back in New York, specifically Long Island, where I grew up, this wouldn't happen. My girlfriends back home would be out here with a shovel, too, and no one would head back home until everyone was shoveled out. They can't possibly think I don't need their help?

Fuck them, I think, stepping deeper into the whiteness.

After an hour, I'm the only person out there in the dark. There is that stillness that occurs only when snow is falling. I can hear a plow scraping the road in the distance. I hold my breath each time it gets closer, knowing that eventually I'll be blocked in again and that the new barrier may be the thing that sends me screaming out into the road to throw myself under the next snowplow. Katie is snowed in by this time herself, a town away, with her boyfriend, so they can't help. With Randy buried in snow at his own house, twenty miles away, I'm it, I'm all I've got. Shoveling snow up and onto a fifteen-foot ridge at the side of the driveway. Every time I turn around, the spot I shoveled is covered again. I feel the tears freezing on my face as I rest my forehead on the handle of the shovel.

"Fuck me," I say, first quietly and then a little louder. Liam has often commented that this is what I should have written on my tombstone. It's appropriate that I am saying it now, because it'll directly precede the stroke I feel like I'm about to have.

I look up to see, in the distance, a young black man with a snow shovel. Shaking my head, I wonder if imagining diversity in this "couldn't get any whiter" town is a sign of hypothermia. He smiles,

clearly having heard my outburst, and says the four most beautiful words in the English language:

“Do you need help?”

Not giving it a second thought, he starts to shovel.

I can't stop thanking him. Martin is his name. It's nothing, Martin keeps telling me. He is young, maybe twenty, and strong. He makes more progress in ten minutes than I've made in an hour. Martin lives up the street and was heading over to help a friend dig out when he saw me. Martin is not as surprised as I am that my neighbors haven't helped me.

His phone rings, and he quickly answers it with a hurried “Yeah, yeah, yeah man,” and he promises to come back and finish when he's done helping his friend. He tells me to go inside and leave the shovel on the steps because mine is better than the ragged one he has been using. Realizing that being a Good Samaritan in the moment is one thing but expecting him to return is another, I watch as Martin walks down the middle of the empty street. The curtain of snow falls after him.

“Good-bye, Martin,” I whisper.

The driveway is covered in white again.

I head back into the house. I don't care anymore. I am beaten by the snow, the town, and life. I officially give up, throw down my snow shovel. Well, I leave it on the porch, convinced that it's more likely to be stolen by the end of the night than used again by me. Good, I've had enough. I'm never shoveling that white shit again. They can come and wheel me out in the spring.

At age nine, in 1972, when George McGovern was running for president, I wrote him letters and passed out leaflets in hopes of helping him get elected. I wrote to the Kennedys about saving the whales. I rescued animals: turtles, cats, and geese. I nursed a cat back to

health that was half-dead when I found it. As I close the door on all that snow and shrug out of my parka, I try to think back to a time when I didn't feel overwhelmed and alone. I can't. A textbook child of an alcoholic, I typically feel it necessary to worry about and take care of everyone except myself.

Most of all, I worry about Katie. I love her so much. She had a bout with anorexia and depression in her mid-teens and had been doing well—until the most recent car accident in a series of minor accidents that always seem to rattle her and derail her progress. To put it mildly, she is a terrible driver who won't wear her glasses, which only makes her more terrible. The best drive of her life must have been during her driving test. She's hit two curbs, multiple parked cars, and clipped a few on the road. We blame it on depth perception.

Last year, when she stopped her college classes because she was worried she had been drinking too much and experimenting with drugs, we quietly found an outpatient program. She had been hanging around a local kid name Gabe Wright and I thought he was the cause, so she agreed to stay away from him. Knowing he is out of the picture, I feel reassured. She's now twenty-two, supposedly an adult, and she tells me she is doing well.

I miss Katie. I miss the long walks around Marblehead we took, the bits of gossip from school and her job in the local grocery store, and just watching bad television in bed with her. Katie has been staying with her boyfriend, who goes to a local college, while she completes classes to be an aesthetician, getting rides back and forth now that her car is out of commission. I tell myself that there are reasons she is never home: school, work, and the damn New England snow. So many different stories I tell myself. Deep down, I've noticed a change I don't like. I push it out of my head. I give her another chance to prove to me that she's okay. I watch and I wait.

The sound of scraping pulls me back into the present. I wonder if the plow has finally come to deal me its death blow, so I open the door.

“Don’t worry,” Martin says. “Stay inside.”

The wind has picked up but the snow has stopped, and he promises to have it done before I know it.

“Martin, your mother raised a good man,” I call out to him. “Please knock on the door when you’re done.”

I go back in and make myself a cup of tea and promise myself a hot bath as soon as he is finished shoveling. Always dieting, I decide to treat myself to a spoonful of honey but, once again, can’t find any spoons, not one. I think of all those socks that disappear in the wash and imagine that there is a special place in heaven for them and the spoons.

In the secret stash of emergency cash in the back of my drawer, I’m somehow down to a single twenty. Emptying the bills out of my wallet, I count all the money I have in the house. Whatever it is, I’m giving it to Martin.

The moment when Martin saved me is the last happy one I can remember before everything changed.

Everywhere across Massachusetts people are almost giddy that it hasn’t snowed in several days. Snow is piled high above my head on both sides of the driveway, a narrow ravine cut in the mountainous snowbank so that I can pull the car in and out. I’m excited to be going out tonight after way too much time alone lately.

I am the sort of person who puts on earrings and a necklace on Tuesday and a month and half later, I’m wearing the same jewelry. I just don’t think about it. It’s not that I don’t like accessories, it just never crosses my mind to change them. When I was younger, I had

a friend who owned more costume jewelry than Macy's. At that point in my life, I had none.

"Put some earrings and a necklace on, for Christ's sake," she said one day. "You look like I just picked you up from prison."

Lacking a desire to look like I'd done a stint at Rikers, I tried to get hip, but I still rarely think to change anything unless I'm going somewhere special. Tonight, assuming the roads are okay, I am going somewhere special. Randy and I are going out on a real date.

On the center of my dresser for many years there has been a cloth-covered jewelry box filled with a few nice things. The box is falling apart, but I can't bear to replace it. Looking at it, I remember the Christmas shopping trip when Katie and Liam purchased it. At seven and four, they had scraped up a little bit of money from doing chores that didn't really need to be done and asked if they could go shopping alone to buy me a present. But since I was divorced with four kids in a state where I knew few people, I had no one else who could take them. So, I drove them to Target, which we fondly pronounced with a French accent, and trailed behind them, promising I wasn't looking. Katie watched carefully so that her brother didn't fall behind or break anything.

I can still see the adorable little scene as if it happened yesterday. Finally, and I do mean finally, because we circle the store approximately nine hundred times, they make it to the cash register. The woman in line behind them sees that I'm watching them and catches on, winking at me. There's a little commotion. As Liam attempts to put a packet of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups on the conveyor, panic sets across Katie's face. She doesn't have enough money. The woman behind them in line whispers something to Katie, taking two dollars out of her wallet, then extracts another single and pushes the candy toward the cashier. She turns to me and shakes her head as I try to approach with my wallet open.

Still shaking her head, she mouths the words “My pleasure.”

I mouth back my thanks and slip through an empty cashier aisle so that I can catch up with the two of them, both beaming with pride. I turn and wave to the woman now paying for her own purchases and am so filled with gratitude for my life and the kindness of people I don't even know that I'm sure I'll never forget her gesture.

So, I keep the things that are important to me in this little box covered with flowers and sequins, even though it is slowly disintegrating, because I like knowing that whatever is inside the box could never be as important as the box itself.

I decide to put on my good earrings, because if I don't do it while I'm thinking about it, I won't remember later. I open my little box and look for the one really nice pair of diamond earrings I own. Semi-circles just big enough but not too big and covered with little diamonds. Grown-up jewelry mixed in with dime-store things the kids have given me over the years. I pick up the top compartment and search underneath, not seeing them where they normally sit.

They're not here.

I look again in the same spot and then again. I take everything out and lay it on the dresser. It is at first a mild disbelief, something like how, when I do the dishes, I keep wondering where all my spoons have gone. My hands are starting to shake, and I feel nauseous. I notice the absence of the few other pieces of jewelry worth something. My great-grandmother's teardrop pearl necklace, which I wore when I got married. A necklace from an old boyfriend who had good taste in jewelry, that being his only redeeming quality.

A thought like a black cloud sweeps over me. Standing at my dresser, earrings, bracelets, and necklaces spread out across the wooden surface, I bow my head and pray for something awful: “Please, God, please let me have been robbed by a stranger.” If I've been robbed by

a stranger, then across the small bedroom in a dresser where I keep papers and bits of nothing, in the third drawer from the bottom, where no one would look unless they knew where to look, all the way in the back of that drawer, there will still be the family jewelry that I never wear. My mother's engagement ring, which I was given after she died. The rings my father took off and handed to me the night he passed away. The engagement ring my ex-husband had spent months saving for, running to the jeweler near the bar where he worked anytime he had extra money, to build up his deposit.

"Please, God, please don't let this be true," I beg as I make my way across the room.

I pause for a moment to gaze at the painting hanging over the slim white dresser, the dresser that holds the answer to my question. Hundreds of tiny yellow flowers with mountains in the background. Katie painted it in her senior year of high school. I want so badly to go back in time. Back to when I took for granted that Katie would finish college, marry her high school boyfriend, and raise a family, or some version of that story. Back to when I sat on the edge of the bed and showed her the jewelry I would eventually pass on to her.

Cautiously, I open the drawer, moving the paperwork aside. I fall to my knees, lifting the lids of boxes, and look at the emptiness over and over until my brain processes exactly what has happened.

The only valuable items left in the drawer are the things Randy has given me over the last few years. Only one person in my world would know which were which.

When I explain Katie to people, I always tell the story of her reaction to my mother's death. My mother and I were never close, to put it kindly, and her death, not long after I moved back east from

Utah, was not a surprise. Still, it was unsettling to have the person who brought me into the world gone, and I gave myself some time before I told my children. First, I told the older set, Melody, sixteen, and her brother Ryan, fourteen. They took it pretty well. I was less sure about my younger two kids. I bought a book by Maria Shriver about explaining death to children and told them Nanny had gone to heaven, not completely believing that myself. Liam, at five years old, had very little reaction to the news of her passing, but Katie, at eight, immediately gasped.

I thought she was about to burst into tears, but instead she said, “Oh no, if I’m this upset, imagine how sad you must be.”

That is Katie.

Now, as I stand in front of the dresser, my thoughts go back to the long weekend in February when I’d left Katie and Chad at my house to keep the driveway clear of snow while I was away. After I’d returned, while waiting for Martin to finish shoveling me out, I had found a spoon at the bottom of the dishwasher. It was bent and burnt. I had chalked its condition up to its having been used to fix something I wasn’t supposed to know had broken. As I recall all of this, a wave of sickness comes over me.

I pick up the phone and call Katie.

“Hi, Mommy,” she says happily.

Even then, I realize that this is the last time I will ever hear her sound so innocent. This conversation will change everything between us. I am going to accuse her of stealing my jewelry, and it will be true, and there will be an excuse that neither one of us will like.

“My jewelry is gone, and I know that you took it.”

Katie breaks down sobbing. “I’m so sorry, it was killing me. I am so sorry. I’m trying to get it back. I love you.”

“Come home right now,” I tell her.

I honestly can’t think of anything else to say. I hang up and call her father and tell him the same thing.

It’s not the missing jewelry that breaks my heart. It’s knowing that her life has spiraled so far out of control that she would *need* to do this to me and to herself. I have no idea what her life has become, which means I have no idea how bad this will get. Over the next few months, I’ll find other things missing as I go to use them. A spare television I had given her, her computer, silver flatware, medication, a punching bag of her brother’s. The empty spaces where these things were stand as reminders of the destruction.

Katie arrives before long and sits on the couch in her too-large coat looking small, vulnerable, dirty, and sick. She was dropped off by Chad, and he waits for her, like a coward, slightly down the street.

She starts to cry and apologize, and the words float over me. She took everything the weekend I was in Puerto Rico. Two separate visits to the pawnshop. She got a couple hundred bucks for over thirty thousand dollars’ worth of my lifetime of treasures and memories. I’m not even sure what to say. I’m not angry, I’m stunned. Did this happen overnight, or did I somehow not see what was in front of me?

We wait for her father, my ex-husband, Mike, as if he has the answer about what to do next. He and I have come a long way, and even with that, it’s still far from an easy relationship. I dreaded making the phone call to him and am not looking forward to his reaction. We sit in silence in the house where Katie has spent much of her childhood. Purchasing this house on my own was one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. I sold everything when I left Utah, including a commercial janitorial service I’d started, initially cleaning offices at night with Liam strapped on my front in a baby carrier, then growing it to employ a dozen workers. To take advantage of a fellow-

ship at Suffolk University, in Boston, I moved across the country, newly divorced and with four kids, to start over. I had squirreled away enough money to buy a house, without anything left over for furniture, in a beautiful town with good schools. I was going to give my children the life they deserved.

I spent the first year recovering from pouring everything I had into the down payment: our bare living room became what I called the Olympic Sock-Skating Center. Putting on our thickest socks, we'd use the gleaming hardwood floors for competitions on how far we could slide, or we'd just do laps around the tiny empty living room. A chill runs up and down my back now as we sit in the fully furnished room: how far we have come from those days only a short time ago. But I'd give it all away to have it empty again, save for my sock-skating Katie.

At this moment, sitting on the couch, she looks like a lost child waiting for her mother to collect her after going missing at Walmart. Her big brown eyes are red from crying, and her mascara has settled underneath them. Her hair is a mess. Naturally a beautiful chestnut that hangs to her midback, it's been dyed black and pulled up in a clip at the nape of her neck. Nothing about her resembles the girl who would literally have stopped traffic just a few short months ago.

When Mike arrives, he looks exactly how I must look to him: completely and utterly crushed. The news has aged Mike twenty years. He sits down in the living room and holds his head in his hands. I'm afraid that when he lifts his face, he will be crying. Though he is normally strong and forceful, there is a little boy inside that tough exterior of the man.

Katie tells us a story about how her boyfriend is trying to get the jewelry back. She can't stop relating every detail. The pawnshop, the Craigslist ads, meeting people so that they can hand over what was

mine in exchange for drugs and small amounts of cash. She starts repeating herself. She is high. I don't know how I hadn't noticed it before, but it is glaringly obvious now.

We demand to see her arms. And this I am not expecting; if I had known, I wouldn't have demanded.

Track marks, unmistakable, crisscross her flesh. My sweet girl who would lay her arm across my lap and plead, "Tickle me," is marked with the telltale signs of heroin use. I feel all the air rush out of my lungs, and in its absence, the truth hits me again like a sledgehammer.

Why did I have to see this, so undeniable, to finally understand what had been going on? The changes I could have noticed but didn't: her sweet personality shifting from loving to moody. Just a teenager, I said. Friends that changed, the new people she hung out with, her hair, which she had dyed, pulled back, and stopped combing. Certainly just a phase. Plastic caps in the laundry that I thought were caps from electrical work. Lighters lying around that were said to belong to "friends," even though no one smoked. Sleeping all day and staying out too late. I attributed it all to school, depression, anything. How could I be so blind? Although it's taken years, it's only now, in a moment, that the fog lifts and I recognize what is in front of me.

Her father wants to know who dragged her into this. The shock is fading, and he is angry. Angry works for him. Mike is a corrections officer in the state prison system. You would never know that this big guy with a shaved head, tattoos, and an angry expression permanently fixed on his face is the same sweet man who paid off my engagement ring each week for months.

"Was it Gabe?" he asks.

Katie's older brother, Ryan, had warned us about Gabe Wright when she first started hanging out with him. Ryan is very protective of his little sister, and he'd heard that Gabe Wright was into drugs.

“Was it Chad?” I ask.

I never liked him; he was sloppy and lazy, without the decent manners to say hello or good-bye when in my house.

“Is he doing this, too?”

“Yes.”

I look out the window and see that Chad has left. There is an overwhelming desire to blame someone, something, anything—anyone other than her. How will I fix this if it’s her that is the problem?

Our sweet little blond-haired toddler had stood in the window every night waiting for her daddy to come home, giving new words to the theme music of *Jeopardy!*—“Daddy, Daddy, I love you”—while she waited patiently for him to pull into the driveway.

As a three-year-old, she’d followed all the neighborhood kids on our street while they rollerbladed, swinging her arms and frolicking in her sneakers that lit up, looking like the happiest of the bunch, never realizing it was necessary to have wheels on her feet.

My nine-year-old, dangerously close to puberty but still a little girl, had performed in the church choir after practicing long and hard to sing her Sunday morning solo, “Morning Has Broken,” from the balcony. Her sweet voice filled the church while I told everyone around me and several pews over that she was my daughter, my eyes brimming over with tears. My heart swelled with love and pride.

My teenager, when she was still young enough to make time to walk with her mom through our historic town, past century-old homes and mansions on the water, had loved playing *Which House Do You Want to Live In?*

My high school graduate, walking across the stage to get her diploma, had surprised everyone by winning a scholarship and making the honor roll, although she’d struggled with a learning disability that had forced her to work twice as hard as everyone else.

My Ladybug.

I wonder if she is still in there, that girl. She must be. I must find her, uncover her, release her. I can't reconcile my daughter with the person nodding off in front of me. The magnitude of the situation hits me again and again.

She puts her coat back on, asking for her phone, which I had taken earlier.

"You're not going anywhere, Katie. You're going to treatment."

"Oh yeah? Where?" she spits out, aware that I have no idea.

"I don't know. You know people who use drugs. You must know someone who has gone to treatment. Where did they go?"

The irony of this is not lost on anyone.

I look at Mike. He has no idea what to do with her, either.

"I have a friend who went to Florida, and he's doing well now. You know, the kid who hit the tree and flipped his car last year," she explains matter-of-factly.

"Patrick Ryan? Dear God, he does heroin? Oh, my God. What's the name of the place?"

She tells us and immediately follows that by adding that she can't leave Chad.

She nods off again, sleeping, sitting straight up, head hanging to one side.

"What the hell are we going to do?" I ask Mike, fully aware that he doesn't have a clue.

"I say we just call the fucking cops on the two of them. Report them for stealing your jewelry. And let the police cart them off to jail."

"Well, that would be a felony. You're thinking a couple of years in Framingham might be good for her?" I try desperately to hold my tongue and not have another of the million fights every divorced couple has that remind them why they are no longer married.

“I don’t know. No, of course not. I don’t know what to do. Google something—there must be information online. Isn’t there someone we can ask for help?”

“Can we just call the police and ask what to do? You’re a corrections officer—don’t you know?”

Mike explains the little he can remember about a legal way to get her into treatment even if she doesn’t want to go. “I don’t really know exactly how to do it,” he says, “but I know we need to go to court and that it doesn’t happen immediately. If we hold her here against her will, that’s kidnapping, and if we report the theft, she will go to jail, so the only thing left is threatening her with getting arrested so that she will go somewhat willingly.”

“What happens if she won’t go?”

There’s no good answer to that question. She can do what she wants. At twenty-two, she’s an adult. Before I can start looking at our in-network providers, Katie picks up the conversation exactly where we left off, bolt upright. I explain to her that if she moves a muscle off the couch, I’ll call the police and report the theft.

“I don’t care what happens to me. You can’t make me go anywhere.”

In my calmest voice possible, I explain that unless she wants both herself and Chad to be arrested, she will go to a treatment center. I remind her how well Chad would do in jail, and her father chimes in to add that he will personally see to it that Chad will never forget the experience. She begins to cry.

I comfort myself with the knowledge that as bad as this is, at least no one knows. My neighbors can continue to plow their own snowflakes, never needing to look over the fence, never knowing what is going on next door—here, now. Katie can recover from this, and we will look back on it as a bad patch in an otherwise good life. She has

the support and love of her family, and we are coming together around her. We will stick by her. Mike and I can still fix this. I have no idea how, but as long as no one knows, we can get past this.

We dig in, argue, and by the end of the day, we have her scheduled for detox followed by a twenty-eight-day treatment program, both located in Massachusetts. Katie sits on the couch waiting to go, nodding off again. The horrible thing is that I've seen her nod off like this many times over the past few months, and I've repeatedly told her to stop hanging out so late with her friends or to eat better, because no one else her age is that tired all the time.

When Mike takes her to the detox facility later that evening, I try desperately not to look at the dresser and the sweet little jewelry box, but they haunt me. I tell no one because no one needs to know. They won't understand. Plus, we will fix it anyhow, so why ruin her reputation? I just have to keep her away from the people she's been hanging around. That boyfriend and Gabe Wright. None of this would have happened if not for them.

How did I not see this? What do I do now? I relive every time over the last few years when something happened that could have been a chance to intervene before it got to this point. I torture myself with all the things I could have done and the signs I should have detected.

I lie alone in bed that night, sleepless and scared. I have now read enough on the Internet that I understand that we may have a fight ahead of us, but I also know my daughter. She, too, is a fighter. I think of Martin and the snow, and how things turned around when I least expected them to. I hope that I have some leftover luck still to claim.

I fall asleep believing that Katie is different. She can be the one who conquers this quickly. I will help her.

We've got this.