

Lost and Found

I sat at the kitchen table, listening to my parents chew. Loudly. My mother still makes her salads using iceberg lettuce, even though I'd introduced Romaine to her years ago. At the time I'd felt like an explorer bringing home an exotic, newly discovered form of vegetation. 'Romaine is tastier ma,' I explained, 'and more nutritious.' But my mother, after asking the price of it scoffed, 'You eat lettuce for roughage, not taste. Besides, once you put some Italian dressing on, it all tastes the same.'

I'd gulped my food down, rushing to get it over with. I've always done that, just as my mother has never eaten a full meal. I watched as she pushed the remains of her salad away and lit up a cigarette. She insists that cooking makes her lose her appetite, so after a few bites she usually sits back and smokes, one cigarette after another. We both watched my dad eat, mindlessly, as if the rhythm of his chewing had put us into a trance. He kept his eyes trained down on his plate with unwavering concentration. This is either from a love of food or the fact that from where he sits he can see the K-Mart sign, with its menacing big red K, full on through our kitchen window. I sit to his right, and only get a glimpse of it out of my peripheral. As for my mother, she sits with her back to the window, so she doesn't have to see it at all. Years ago my sister Wanda disappeared there. My mother had turned her back to look at some yarn, and then Wanda was gone forever. Sometimes, I imagined that if I lifted my mother's shirt, I'd find a big red K branded over her heart.

My mother crushed out her cigarette in her macaroni and focused her Pekinese eyes on

me. Over the years the goiter in her neck has caused her eyes to bulge, as if too full from having seen too much.

“So how’d you like the movie,” she asked, her tone hopeful as she propped her arm on the back of her chair.

“Good. Real good,” I said. I’d watched the Titanic sink at the Quo Vadis Theater with a handful of senior citizens in the middle of the day. It was a surreal experience. At one point, the silvered heads in the dark theater seemed indistinguishable from the bobbing ones in the black sea up on the screen.

“I hear the special effects are something else,” my dad offered, his fingers wiggling around in the pickle jar, trying to grasp a lone gherkin lying on the bottom.

“Yeah, they were. You and ma should have come.”

“Tom use a fork for crying out loud.” She pushed her own fork across the table before turning back to me. “No way am I gonna sit in a theater for three hours. We’ll wait until it comes out on t.v. I’m just glad you’re finally getting out some,” she said patting my hand. I knew I was smiling, but I couldn’t feel it. It seemed as if half my face had been shot up with novocaine, so I lowered my head and gazed down at the cigarette butt sticking out of the congealed mountain of macaroni on my mother’s plate.

It was a mistake to come back to Michigan after Sam died. But staying in New York was out of the question. At first I thought I was going to get through it okay. Even my friends thought I was getting on amazingly well. One week after Sam’s funeral, I was back at the second-hand bookstore I managed on Lexington Avenue. I had to walk pass the Laundromat where we did our laundry together Saturday afternoons, and then cross Central Park to get to the

east side. Near the reservoir there was a little hill where Sam had proposed, and I always made a point to climb over it. My route was routine, it never occurred to me to take another. I thought it best to go on not as if nothing happened, but to just go on, which I did without event until one day on my way home I saw two lovers camped out on mine and Sam's hill. They were just kids making out; school backpacks were at their feet. I stood there a moment, confused as to which way I should go; to the left, to the right? Finally, I hurried around to the right, keeping my eyes down on the ground and never looking up until I arrived at the Laundromat to pick up my laundry. It was there, while paying, that I noticed an elderly couple folding a fitted sheet, an impossible thing to do neatly.

When we did our first load of laundry together, Sam was appalled when I handed him a pink cotton sheet with red roses folded into an unwieldy triangle, all wrinkled and full of air. "Does it really matter," I asked. "We're just going to sleep on it again anyway." But he insisted on re-folding it correctly. After ten minutes, he handed it back to me. "How about that!" He was so smug and pleased with himself. I looked down at the trim, compact square, almost as perfect as the day I'd first slipped it out of its plastic envelope, and laughed. "Very clever Sam. In the time it took you to fold one sheet, I've folded the rest of the laundry."

A whole lifetime. I stood and watched the elderly couple fold that sheet, their arthritic fingers glancing each other every time they made a new square. When they looked up and noticed me staring, the change from a twenty crushed within my fist, the old woman smiled and said, "After forty years you'd think we could do better." I felt like I was waking up from a terrible accident to find my legs gone. After that, I put everything in storage, put the apartment on the market, and moved back home.

“Well, better clean up,” my mother sighed.

“I’m not finished,” Dad said, spitting an olive pit onto the edge of his plate.

“Ma, why don’t you go sit on the porch while I clean up. I’ll make some coffee and bring it on out.”

“Alright then.” As she got up, I noticed how the flesh hung off her arms, as if she were shrinking inside her own skin. She stood a second, looking down at the remains of dinner, and placed her hands on her hips, drawing her cotton house dress close to her body. It exposed the faint outline of her ostomy pouch, and reminded me of her brush with death. She’d gotten the bladder cancer a few years after I’d left home for New York. My father was squeamish, and couldn’t handle fitting the clear plastic pouch onto the small, red volcano that protruded out of her side, so I had to return to help. It wasn’t out of altruistic impulse. It was guilt. I’d talked my mother into getting the operation when all she wanted was to die in peace. I lied and told her she had to be here, just in case Wanda ever found her way back. It was a game we played.

She kissed the top of my head before leaving. She’s always done that, even if just leaving to go sit in another room, or to say goodnight before going to bed. An overly affectionate mother, some would say. But I’d always felt the fear under the kiss, the desperation in the hug, that I might one day disappear, too. She never forgave Sam for making that happen. When we married, she refused to attend our wedding, her reason being our sixteen-year age difference, even though I was an old-looking thirty-two year old and Sam was a young-looking forty-eight. “He’ll die and leave you a young widow,” she warned. “Your youth will be gone, dad and I will be dead, and you’ll be left to die all alone.” And when her prophecy of doom didn’t produce the desired effect, which would be to abandon all plans and move back to

Michigan, my mother resorted to questioning his morals. “What kind of man does a nice girl meet in a bar anyway,” she asked. A good man, I answered.

We’d met while I was bartending in Hoboken. I was putting myself through graduate school working toward a Ph.D. in English literature. It wasn’t long before I noticed that every Monday at 8:15, this tall man with an easy smile would come in for a beer. The bar catered to commuters who crossed the Hudson by ferry, and then grabbed a quick drink before going home. By eight the place was usually dead, and there wasn’t much to do but watch t.v. I’d watch from one end of the bar while Sam watched from the other. Every once in awhile, I’d look to see if he needed anything, and find he was watching me instead of the t.v. He’d look away, obviously embarrassed. Then one night a snowstorm blew over the bar’s Satellite dish and the t.v. lost its picture. Except for the wind blowing and the hum of the beer cooler, everything was quiet. It stayed that way until he said, “You want to close up I’ll leave.”

“Did you drive?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Then how are you going to get home?”

“Very slowly.”

The way he said it made me feel like that was how he’d been living his life lately. It was something I understood.

“I think you should stay until it lets up,” I said.

I made coffee, and he picked out some music on the jukebox. Nat King Cole and Billie Holiday. For the rest of the night we sat in front of the window and watched the snow, so heavy it blurred out everything, like the white static on the bar’s t.v. screen. I found out he was just

coming out of a five-year post-divorce depression. I told him I suspected I didn't want a Ph.D. in English Literature so much as I was afraid to leave school. I don't remember everything we talked about, but I do remember that we were both surprised, and sorry, to see the snow stop and the sun come up.

"I'm finished Winnie," my dad said crumpling up his greasy napkin. "You up for a walk later?"

I was filling the sink with water. "Sure," I said looking at him over my shoulder, "I'll go for a walk."

Even though my parents were the same age, my father looked much younger. Other than the strands of thin, gray hair that still clung stubbornly to his skull, he was youthful. He took long walks in the evening, alone, because my mother didn't like to go anywhere, except Bingo at St. Anthony's. Since I've been home, I go with him. We take the exact route we used to travel on Halloween nights, when he'd take me trick or treating. Now we both like to look into the windows of homes lit up for the evening. You can tell just by the way people sit in their easy chairs and sofas which families are happy, and which are not.

I shut the water off and looked out at the K-Mart sign, growing brighter as the sky grew darker. I'd been too young to remember Wanda. When I was small, I used to ask my parents about her, what she was like, but as I grew older I began to understand that every time I mentioned Wanda's name, it was like sticking a needle in my mother's heart. Soon I began to make up my own story. After a few dates, I still hadn't told Sam about Wanda, but I did tell him about the book I'd been trying to write for ten years. We were lying on the hill where he'd eventually propose, looking up at the sky.

“It’s about a little girl who disappears one day while shopping with her mother.”

“What happens to her,” he asked.

I shrugged. “You never find out.”

He sat up onto his elbows and looked at me. “That’s a terrible ending. You can’t do that. You have to have resolution. Otherwise, the reader will feel cheated.”

I smiled because he was an accountant, and worked with equations to which there were always an answer. “But it’s more authentic that way,” I said. “Since when does anyone’s life have resolution, or a happy ending for that matter?”

He laid back down and closed his eyes. “Well, if you ever write about us, make sure ours does.”

I gave up scrubbing the dried egg on a fork from this morning’s breakfast, and threw it in the garbage. Lately I’ve had no patience. It’s like I can’t be bothered with details anymore, such as dried egg on the silverware, or mildewed grout in the bathroom. A few days ago, my parents asked me if I would like to be interred with them, when the time comes. We were watching *The Golden Girls* on television. Blanche refused to get a hearing aid because it meant she was getting old. During a commercial, mother turned to me and said, ‘Winifred, your father and I want you to know we reserved space for you in our mausoleum.’ My mother couldn’t stomach the idea of turning into fertilizer, so they were going for the immense cost of being put to rest above ground. I’d seen the plans, the design of the thing, when she and dad were making their afterlife reservations. It looked like a small home with a high security gate. At the time, I had laughed and asked if they would be getting cable.

She went on to explain that inside was one slab for dad, another for herself, and of

course, another for Wanda, in case she one day found her way back to her real family. (A psychic had once told my mom that Wanda was being raised somewhere in Canada by Jehovah Witnesses). But since Sam had died, they could order a slab to be built for me, but it would have to be over Wanda's, just like a bunk bed, because there wasn't much room in the crypt. I sat there, looking at her earnest, hopeful face wanting to laugh and scream at the same time. Finally, I gave an apologetic half-laugh.

“Mom, I'm going to be buried with my husband.”

“Lilah, she's right,” dad tried to say, but mother cut him off.

“But you live here now. He's in New York! Who's going to visit you in New York?”

This time, I really did laugh. “Well at that point I don't think I'll be up for much socializing!”

My dad began to laugh too, but mom stared at me. Nothing was going to crack that face. I was choosing *him* over her, even in death, her look said. I could feel my throat begin to constrict as if something were garroting me.

“Look, you want to be buried with Dad. It's only natural that I . . .”

“Your father and I have been married for forty-eight years. We've built a life together, had children together . . .”

“That's right,” I said as I pushed myself up from my chair. “And Sam and I were building one too.”

It was as if she'd taken her big mother fist and sucker punched me, but I didn't let them see that. Instead, I walked calmly up to my room, shut my door, and began to hyperventilate. It felt like I was six months in the past and the police were at the door. ‘There's been an accident,’

a kid in blue said. I was half-asleep and didn't understand, even after they'd repeated to me what had happened several times. 'What?' I kept asking. 'What?' They were watching me, he and his partner, an older man with the red, cratered nose of a heavy drinker. I felt I should cry, but I couldn't. The tears wouldn't come. It felt like a bubble of pressure was building up inside me and would burst if I didn't make myself cry, but the more I tried, the more I hyperventilated, until finally I made myself pass out.

I looked down at my hands, submerged in the soapy water. The bubbles were tinted orange from the dissolved cheese, and bits of floating iceberg lettuce tickled my wrists. I lifted my mother's plate up off the counter, scowling at her uneaten dinner. So much waste. If she hadn't crushed her cigarette in it, we could have saved it. I was about to dump it into the garbage when I saw something on top of the two days' worth of table scraps and junk mail: an envelope with my name on it. I wasn't told I'd gotten any mail. I set the plate aside and lifted it out. It was addressed to me, in care of my parents. The return address read, **The Sperm Bank of Greater New York**, and it had already been opened.

I could feel my blood picking up speed; my hands were trembling as I took the letter out of the oil-stained envelope and smoothed it out onto the counter.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Sahjay,

Your annual cryogenic storage fee is long overdue. We have made repeated attempts to contact you. Since we have not received payment for storage, and are unable to retain deposits for an indefinite period of time, we are writing to notify you that we will dispose of specimen samples within thirty days unless we receive instructions otherwise.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding this matter.

Sincerely,

Sherry Braun, Bailor

The typed letters began to coalesce and waver like a mirage. Sam had left nothing to chance. He'd left me set for life. A 401K, life insurance, a well-diversified portfolio, and now, this. A few years ago, he'd had to have a tumor from his groin removed. It turned out to be benign, but before the operation the doctor suggested we take precautions, just in case we ever wanted to have children. I didn't think it was necessary, but Sam didn't want me to ever have to regret anything.

The screen door scraped against the concrete of our porch. "Winnie," my mother called. "Is the coffee ready?"

"Not yet!"

With the end of my shirt, I blotted up the tears that had fallen onto the letter, and noticed the date. August 12; it had come this morning. Was it a sign, or just dumb luck that I'd hesitated before dumping my mother's macaroni? I tried to tell myself she'd thrown it out by mistake but, I knew better.

I brought the coffee out on a tray. My father drinks his coffee black, my mom takes only Sweet and Low. I was drinking green tea, which she had spit out after tasting once. Another crazy thing I picked up in New York, along with the Romaine lettuce, the vegetarian food and the old husband.

"Thanks honey," she said as she took her cup from the tray. I set dad's down beside his aluminum and plastic lawn chair, and settled myself on the cement step that fronts our porch, with my back to my parents. The street was framed with a purplish dusk, and the air seemed to be cooling down from the hot summer day. The streetlights had just come on, and a group of

kids had a kick ball game going in the street. Their voices and shouts were accompanied by a chorus of crickets hiding in the hedges, and the far-off zoom of cars out on Cherryhill Drive. It was the suburban version of a bucolic setting.

Through the rayon pocket of my shirt, I could feel the stiff pressure of the letter against my skin, prodding me to speak, even though I didn't exactly know what I was going to say.

"I've been thinking about what you said the other night, about family."

Behind me, I could hear my mother's lighter click, and then a whoosh of breath as she exhaled. Some of her cigarette smoke had just reached my left shoulder as she said, "Winnie, I didn't mean to upset you."

"I know. Actually, it was good. It made me come to a decision."

I paused, feeling their apprehension. Things had finally settled down to some sort of normalcy. I no longer stayed in bed for days at a time. I bathed regularly, put on weight. In the afternoons I wandered the empty malls and in the evenings I zoned out in front of the t.v. while my mother crocheted and my dad snored. As far as they were concerned, life was back on track.

"I've decided to have Sam's baby."

I waited. My words seemed trapped in the sticky air above our heads. Finally, my father cleared his throat.

"Win, Sam is dead," he said.

I looked over my shoulder at him. His face was gray in the dusk, but I could tell he was studying me as if I were a puzzle with a piece missing.

"I'm not delusional Dad." I took the letter out of my pocket and handed it to him just as a woman from across the street called out.

“Mar-eee!”

I turned back to see Mary, a tall girl standing behind home plate in the kick ball game, strike an exasperated pose.

“*Come on* Mom, I gotta another *turn* to go,” she cried, her voice pleading in exaggerated desperation, as if her mother were about to deprive her of her one last shot at glory.

“*Now*, Mary!”

My dad handed the letter back to me. “I don’t understand.”

I refolded it and slipped it back into my pocket. “Mom why don’t you explain it to dad.”

“Winifred,” my mother said, “I only did what I thought was for the best.”

I watched as Mary gave the ball an angry kick before sulking off home. I swivelled around to face my mom. “How could you do something like that?”

“Do what?” My father looked at my mother and then back at me.

“Honey.” She reached out and grabbed my wrist. “I was afraid it might get you upset all over again. Remember what the doctor said?”

I looked down at her hand, the fine-boned fingers gnarled with arthritis were gripping me so tightly I could feel my blood slow. I stood up, so she had to let go, and went inside.

Upstairs, I curled up on my bed with its frilly, dollhouse canopy and watched as the headlights from cars on Cherryhill Rd. washed across my ceiling, like searchlights in a prison courtyard. My room hadn’t changed since highschool: Two lamps, porcelain ladies with light bulbs under their hooped skirts, still sat on my dresser. My favorite stuffed animals lined my shelves and next to my Hi-Fidelity phonograph was a stack of LP’s. Not long ago, my mother suggested that since I was back home, perhaps I’d like to redecorate.

I got up and went over to the window and looked out onto the K-Mart out back. Traffic on Cherryhill slowed down as a Corolla waited to make a left-hand turn into the store's double-wide driveway. I ran the tips of my fingers across the edge of the letter sticking up out of my pocket. Sam had been patient. He was willing to wait until I was ready. I assured him I would be, one day. But the truth was, the idea of a baby scared me. I knew from my parents how a child could consume you. As small as they were, they could swallow you whole.

Snatches of their conversation pulled me away from the window, my mother's voice forced and low with concern. I stood in my doorway and stared at the closed door across the hallway. It was Wanda's room, and I hadn't been in there for years. When I was small, I'd often wake up in the middle of the night to see a sliver of light shining out from underneath the closed door. My mother used to sit in there, all by herself when she couldn't sleep. Sometimes, I could hear her cry.

I stepped across the hallway and opened the door. A wave of hot, stale air hit my face as I turned on the overhead light, illuminating a five-year-old girl's room, perfectly preserved. Disney characters scampered over the walls, a romper horse sat in the corner, and a single green sandal rested at the foot of a small bed. They'd found it in the woods in back of the store the same day Wanda disappeared. On a bureau there was a framed picture of Wanda, taken not long before she was abducted. I went over and held it under the light. Her hair is pulled up into two pigtails, tied with green ribbons and she's smiling, showing off the gap between her two front teeth, just like mine, just like my mother's. Years ago, the police used some of my features to create an age-enhanced photograph of her, of what she might look like as a grown woman. I suppose she could have the same wide-set eyes and sharp chin. But I have to believe just living

itself has as much to do with shaping a face as genes. I set the photograph back down. Nothing ever came of it, even though it had been distributed around the country.

I went to the bed, where a Raggedy Ann doll I always coveted but was never allowed to play with, was lying on the pillow. I picked her up. Her sewn on smile was frayed, and the black button eyes were dusty.

“Winifred?”

My mom was standing in the doorway, and in the shadowy light her bulging eyes looked fear-stricken. She took a step just inside the room, but went no further.

“That was her favorite doll,” she said.

“I know.”

She looked uncertain if she wanted to enter, but then something on a shelf across the room caught her eye, and she went over to it. There, she lifted off a wooden music box shaped like a pig, and opened it. A ballerina sprang up and the tinkling theme music from the movie *Lili*, played out into the dead air as she brought it over and sat down beside me.

“She used to love listening to this,” she said, staring down at the twirling dancer, smiling.

“Mom I’m going back to New York.”

She shook her head and laughed. “She wanted to be a ballerina.”

“It’s not anything you did. It’s just time.”

“I made her a pink tutu,” she said, her smile fading as her voice grew wistful. “I wonder whatever happened to it?”

The music slowed until it ran out and the ballerina stopped spinning. I could feel her trembling next to me, and put my arm around her shoulder.

“It was so hot that day, she didn’t want to hold my hand.” She closed the lid and looked up at me with wet eyes. “If only I’d just held on to her hand.”

~

I sat on the porch, with my one suitcase, shielded from the early morning sunshine. The taxi taking me to the airport was supposed to arrive in twenty minutes. I checked my watch. Nineteen minutes now. It was too early for any kids to be out playing yet. Saturday morning. Probably watching cartoons, eating bowl after bowl of cereal with names like Captain Crunch and Count Chocula. But in a few hours, they’d be running about in swimsuits, playing in the sprinklers that would be watering the lawns already turning brown from the mini-drought the Midwest was having. I lifted the letter from the clinic out of my purse and turned it over in my hands. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, but for now I was going to pay the storage fee for at least one more year.

My dad came out onto the porch. “Sure you don’t want to wait inside in the air-conditioning?”

“I’m fine,” I said, slipping the letter back into my purse. He pulled up a chair, and we sat in silence for a few minutes as we both stared out at the dying grass.

“Your mom would see you off but she’s not feeling well.”

“I’ll give her a call when I get to New York.”

A little girl on a tricycle with streamers flying from the handle grips was heading down the sidewalk. She stared at us, we stared at her, until she passed our house. My dad cleared his throat.

“About a year ago, they were breaking ground for a new Farmer Jack over in Newburg

Heights and they uh . . .” He watched the girl turn the corner of our street and disappear.

“ . . . they found some remains. A child.”

I looked at my father. His focus was concentrated, as if he were still fighting with a decision.

“They found a green sandal and wanted to do, you know, one of those DNA tests but, your mother wouldn’t agree to it. She just didn’t want to know.”

I was cautious, because my dad never talked about Wanda. “And what about you?”

His eyes were following a blue caddy driving slowly up our street. “I knew a long time ago. I think this is your cab.”

The cab pulled up to the curb and honked its horn. My father stood. “Let me help you with that,” he said as he lifted my suitcase.

After my suitcase was loaded into the trunk we stood a moment, putting off the goodbye. Over his shoulder, I saw the curtains in our livingroom window move.

“Takes at least forty-five minutes to get to the airport, lady,” the driver said.

My dad wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. “You take care now.”

I pulled away and climbed into the back seat, trying to hide my eyes so the driver couldn’t see I was crying. As we drove away, I watched my dad grow smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror.

Once in New York, I didn’t go to Manhattan, to my empty apartment. Instead I instructed my cab driver to take me to Valhalla, heaven of the Gods, as the Norse legend goes. It was actually a sleepy little hamlet of Westchester County. From the backseat I directed my driver, a nice fellow from Jamaica with long dreads, to the Gate of Heaven Cemetery. We had to

first pass Sharon Gardens, a final resting place for the Jews, then the Greek Orthodox section. My husband was buried with the Catholics.

We drove slowly, up a path that followed a gentle slope of an enormous hill. The view was magnificent. At the top, you could look out on a vast sea of tombstones spread out below, a beautiful valley of death. Finally, we came to a sign that said Section 20, plots 30-50.

“Down here,” I pointed. “On the right.”

I paid the driver and gave him an enormous tip.

“Miss, ya sure ya dan want me ta wait,” he asked as he pulled my suitcase out of the trunk.

“No,” I said, smiling. “I’m sure.”

He glanced up at the darkening sky. “Well then, here miss.” He reached underneath his seat and pulled out a fold-up umbrella. “Ya a very generous lady. It ma gift ta ya.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting. “That’s very kind.”

Then he drove away. I carried my suitcase over to Sam’s tombstone and kneeled down before it. The flowers I’d left last time I was here were brown and shriveled. I reached out and touched the gray marble. *In Loving Memory, For All Eternity* the engraved words read. A hyphen with my name and birth date were next to his, followed by a blank. I took comfort in the fact that one day, when the other half of that equation was filled in, I’d be resting here with Sam. I thought of Wanda, and of her never having a real resting place; just an empty slab of cold stone beside a mother who refused to let her go.

A few drops of rain fell, but I didn’t mind. I stretched out over his grave, pressed my ear to the grass and closed my eyes. I pretended I wasn’t in the Gate of Heaven cemetery. Instead, I

was in our bedroom, lying with Sam on that quiet rainy afternoon when he first asked me if I thought I might ever want to have a baby. My ear had been pressed to his chest, and the slow, steady beat of his heart was lulling me to sleep. I remember stroking his cheek drowsily and saying something I truly believed at the time. “Not yet,” I had murmured. “We have time. We still have plenty of time.”