

DERBY TOWN

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She'd been sad her whole life, Bernie realized.

It was eleven at night in the cereal aisle that the revelation came. There was a man in a green smock a few feet away, inventorying boxes. He looked up, and a sob from the deep of her lungs unburied itself; it's impossible to say which happened first. Bernie quickly shook her head to assure him she was fine, and the man nodded and got back to it. But how could he? How could he do that to her? She so clearly needed his help.

Bernie usually did the grocery shopping at night to avoid the gridlock of the A&P parking lot or running into people from town. It's not that she didn't like people from town. They were the only people. But that didn't mean she had to like them when she was in dungarees with her hair undone and only halfway down her list, the girls begging for this and that, even if it wasn't on sale. Bernie's mother, Lucy, had called in the afternoon asking for some things from the store and Bernie had almost said, had heard herself almost saying, *Why don't I pick you up and we can go together?* What luck she didn't. If the revelation had to happen in the cereal aisle, and Bernie did not question that it did, at least she was alone.

It was something about all the boxes and how stupid it seemed to her that someone should have to count them. She couldn't imagine what the manager might do with the number. Would he track down the missing Corn Flakes? Prosecute the granola thief? Bernie had been summoned to municipal court once for a traffic ticket, as a teenager. The woman ahead of her on the docket got caught stealing 72 dollars worth of meat from the ShopRite on Middle Ave. The town's attorney, Mr. Wix, said she tried to pack it all down her blouse. Then the woman and Mr. Wix and Judge Odell withdrew to a side room, but only Judge Odell returned to court. Bernie's father had made sure her speeding ticket, 38 in a 25, would be dismissed. The meat woman wasn't even from town.

Bernie could hardly believe she remembered the exact number, but she was certain. 72 dollars. That poor woman and all her problems and all that meat in her top. At least meat was pricey. You'd have to be the saddest person in the world to steal the cereal. And then Bernie thought, I should steal cereal.

Bernie was breathing and terribly aware of it. Long, exaggerated breaths to keep pressure on the sobs. She rushed out to the Toyota to let them out, but they didn't. She tried

to cough the sobs back up, pausing on all the bad things that had happened to her recently, then in the past. All the dreadful things that were out there. But still, the sobs refused her. Bernie went back into the A&P defeated. Someone had already re-shelved the items from her abandoned cart, and she suspected the man in the green smock had done it, as a favor to her, so she wouldn't have to feel embarrassed over leaving them. She ransacked her purse for her list and the list her mother had dictated and started over again in aisle one.

Depositing Lucy's groceries onto the sideboard an hour later, Bernie noticed a sheet of construction paper folded up and asked after it.

"What does it look like, Bernadette?" her mother answered. "A list."

"When's it for?"

"Before I die. When else is there?"

Weed the garden. Buy new curtains. Knit bats for my granddaughters.

It was a to-do list, really, save for one item. *Visit the twins again.*

"We could go together, Ma," Bernie offered without thinking.

"Aren't you too old to be reading other people's things?" came Lucy's voice from the kitchen, followed by the sound of her steps descending the cellar stairs. She had a talent for leaving Bernie with the remains of a conversation, the guilt that comes from the fact of something staying unfinished, regardless of whose fault. She wanted to compliment her mother, *It's a fine idea to visit them*, but she knew better. They didn't push.

When Bernie reached home that night, she started a list, too. She thought it might help her hold onto the feeling that life should still get bigger for them all. Bernie sometimes believed so in particular moments, but before long the sink would clog or one of the girls would need a Band-Aid; the next thing would happen. Bernie could forget entirely about it, about possibility, for months or even years at a stretch. But then maybe down the shore with her daughters, watching them share a sandwich, or put zinc on each other's noses. Or driving home at night on an unlit side street, when the world afforded Bernie just a minute to feel invisible. Possibility would wash over her from nowhere, as if it was something brand new.

Bernie kept her own list in her head, for fear Bill—her husband—would see it. Not that he would object; she guessed he might laugh at her. That first night, it boasted only one item, and Bernie dreamed it written out in the crispest cursive. *Send the girls to college.*

She settled on a few other items over the following weeks, and that's how she thought of them, like things she might pick up from the store when she had the money. She wanted to go to Europe, and she wanted to learn to sew so she could make dresses for her daughters. She would finish nursing school, for sure. Bernie only had three more semesters, never mind her short hiatus had lasted nearly five years, since before Shyla was born. Bernie wanted to go to space, if that ever became possible for regular people. She wanted to let Bill move back in, in time. If she had numbered her list, number one would be freedom. Bernie Wildash wanted to feel free. She didn't care when. Sooner was good, but so was later on. Just, free.

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That following September, Bernie did return to school. Tuesday and Thursday evenings she dropped Angela and Shyla at Lucy's at five and picked them up around ten. "I just hope this isn't a waste of money is all," Lucy had said to her when Bernie asked about the babysitting, and Bernie recognized it as her mother's offer to pay.

Bill was living at his mother's old house in Woodhull at the time, which still wasn't sold, though the woman had died two years earlier. Bernie knew he would be glad to have the girls twice a week, but it was easier to leave them with Lucy. No questions or complications. Bernie didn't need Bill to know she'd gone back to school, and she didn't need to tell him her mother footed the tuition. Bill Bell had a hard enough time keeping a job as it was.

"You girls will be good for Grandma, right?"

Angela and Shyla ignored Bernie from the backseat. She wondered what the girls really thought of Lucy, the last woman on Earth to serve cream soda and keep her Milano cookies in the fridge. When Lucy had company—and Angie and Shy were really the only company she had—she would lay the cookies out on a white Lenox plate covered with a pale pink paper doily.

"I don't want to," Shyla said.

"You don't want to what, Shy?" Bernie asked, but Shyla didn't answer. "Be good?"

"You don't want to what?" Angela was asking. She'd made the case that ten was old enough to stay home alone for five hours, and Bernie agreed with her. But ten's not old enough to babysit a four-year-old for five hours so Shyla still had to go to Grandma's, Bernie held. Angela didn't decide right there, but as soon as Bernie started to collect toys and

pajamas for Shyla, she heard Angela packing up her backpack. “What don’t you want, Shy?” Angie repeated.

“I don’t know,” Shy said, and everyone left it at that.

When Bernie pulled up to her mother’s house on Legion Street mail was lying about the front yard, if five square feet of dirt could be called a yard. White envelopes probably containing bills and Macy’s circulars for the Columbus Day Sale. Bernie sent Angela to collect it while she helped Shyla out of her booster seat. Lucy still lived in the one-family row house where Bernie had grown up. It was the same house Bernie’s father George had grown up in, too. Its buttery yellow paint was peeling so badly the house was almost as brown as it was yellow. Bernie noted the gutters needed clearing. Bill wouldn’t mind.

The old screen door opened noisily and screamed shut.

“I picked up all that stuff, Grandma.” Angela was struggling to balance the new mail atop the existing pile.

“What’d you do that for?” Lucy yelled from the back of the house. “I was getting to it.”

“You’re welcome,” was all Angie said before darting upstairs, probably to Bernie’s old room on the third floor.

Bernie dropped Angela’s backpack inside the door without stepping off the front porch. “Mom?”

“Hurry, I’m in the kitchen.”

“I’m running late. Their stuff is in the hallway and some groceries for you. Coffee cake was on sale. I’ll see you in a few hours, Shy.”

But Shyla had already chased her sister up.

Climbing back into to the car, Bernie wondered what her father would think if he could see the house now, the letters of their shared last name peeling from the mailbox. Theirs was once the nicest place on Legion Street, by Derby standards. The small yard was always mowed, the porch swept of leaves, and the windows washed, inside and out, by Bernie. George would sit outside after dinner, the legs of the plastic patio furniture straining beneath him. He died when Bernie was 25, without the chance to even meet Shyla. Bernie didn’t really miss him anymore, but she did find herself hypothesizing about what he might do or say in any given situation. Take this one. Theirs was still the nicest house on Legion

Street, Bernie realized. What would her father think of Derby Town now? Everything deteriorating at an even rate.

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The Wildashes had been Derby royalty, for a time. George served as mayor through most of the 50s and gained quite a reputation around town, for nearly everything. George was the nicest guy in Derby, the way he lobbied the town council to bail out The Grochowiczes when a sinkhole appeared, overnight, in the middle of their farm, on the edge of town. Or maybe he was a crook. He cheated poor, old Mrs. Grochowicz out of her husband's family's land when everyone knows she could have filled that sinkhole, eventually, or at least planted around it. Others might say George Wildash was such a clever man to turn a natural disaster into a boon for Derby Town. *The Derby Community Pool*. Half the town refused to swim there its first season on account of what a scandal it seemed, a pale blue hole full of strangers in bathing suits, right there, in poor, old Mrs. Grochowicz's backyard, where her tomato plants should be.

George Wildash just smiled, because that was the kind of guy he was, very quick to smile, for a time.

In his first term as mayor, George married Lucy Miller, his high school sweetheart, just like everyone expected he would. She was twenty-six then and still twenty-six when she gave birth to the couple's first baby, Iris. Lucy was only twenty-seven when Margaret came along. *Irish twins*, people were known to whisper, in the library or the post office or wherever Lucy could be seen with her little girls in tow. Lucy would just smile because all she ever wanted to be, besides Lucy Wildash, was a mother to two girls. Sisters, close in age, just like she and her own sister.

The third baby, born two years later and four weeks prematurely, was a welcome enough surprise. The youngest Wildash girl, Bernadette, earned herself the nickname *Hurricane* for all the noise she made from the back pew. One Sunday morning, Father Sciccone interrupted his homily to say, to the surprise and embarrassment of everyone, especially himself, "Mrs. Wildash, could you please get a hold of *that girl?*" The whole congregation turned to see Bernie tearing pages from a Missal.

Unlike "the twins," which even Lucy and George had taken to calling their two eldest girls, Bernie relished the attention of being the mayor's daughter. Whenever it came time to unveil some meaningless municipal investment, like that ridiculous 12-foot wrought iron

clock George had installed outside City Hall, Bernie would volunteer to cut the ribbon. As for the all-important matter of who would light the Derby Town Christmas Tree, Bernie was always eager to flip the pretend switch, housed in its gaudy, gold-painted plastic box, while the real switch was thrown, simultaneously, by some town employee hidden below the dais, completely unbeknownst to Bernie. *Hurricane* was truncated to *Hurry* by Iris, or Maggie (no one could tell whom because they did everything together), and the name grew into a term of endearment for the nuisance of their little sister.

“Have you seen the twins, Hurry?” Lucy asked four-year-old Bernie one April afternoon. The three girls had been playing outside together until the twins decided to ride their bikes past the corner of Sweet Briar and Limoli Lane, which was as far as Bernie was allowed to roam.

“I hate them” was Bernie’s reply.

It would be another hour before Lucy called George at the office, growing a bit panicked about the twins’ long absence. A bit panicked, but not too panicked because everyone knew the girls and, anyway, that’s just not the kind of town Derby is. But when Maggie wandered back alone and crying so hard she could barely speak, Lucy called George again, telling him he ought to come home.

“Shh, Magpie,” George soothed, as he pulled her onto his lap. Maggie wrapped her arms around his neck. Her limbs were thin, pale and freckled, like a Maggie’s limbs should be. Lucy was upstairs with Bernie. “Where’s Iris, Magpie?”

George eventually calmed Maggie long enough to find out just how far the girls had ridden, all the way to Mrs. Sawicki’s house on Valley Road, when they decided to stop. Iris wanted to play hide-and-seek, but only if Maggie agreed to be It. Maggie counted out fifty-five Mississippis with her head in her hands.

“Did you peek at all?” George asked her. “It’s okay if you did.”

George called the Chief of Police to let him know that Iris was almost two hours missing, and could he please go over to the Sawicki place to look around? Maggie said she wandered toward the garden next-door. She’ll answer if you call her name, because she’s a good girl like that. George promised to be right over, but, ten minutes later, the Chief rang The Wildashes’ front doorbell. Lucy raced down the stairs. George could see a girl’s bike in the backseat of the Chief’s cruiser. The purple and yellow streamers that hung from Iris’s handlebars were stuck in the door.

“I’m so sorry, Mayor, Mrs. Wildash,” the Chief began, before hellos even. “We found Iris. Mrs. Sawicki did actually.”

The couple didn’t move a muscle.

“She was hiding in an old refrigerator that Don Connolly had put out to the curb for pick up. I’m so sorry, Lucy. She must have closed the door all the way, and she couldn’t get out. Ran out of air, I’d guess, on the evidence.”

There was a law enacted later that summer about unbolting refrigerator doors before putting them out for trash, and George eventually worked up the nerve to ask his wife if she’d like to sue Don Connolly, who had moved out of Derby Town less than three weeks after Iris’s funeral. George and Lucy couldn’t pretend Iris’s death hadn’t happened, but they did, generally, speak as if it hadn’t.

“No, thank you,” Lucy demurred. “Not right this second.”

Eight months later, in December of that same year, just as Lucy was starting to think that maybe she would like to sue Don Connolly after all, and as Bernie was finishing her first term of kindergarten—a year too early, but George thought it would be better for Lucy to have an empty house in the mornings—it was just then, before the annual Derby Christmas Tree Lighting, that Maggie walked herself all the way to the Derby Pool, which was closed for winter. She had been climbing the ladder of the diving board with her friend Dana, who Lucy hated for not being Iris and forbid from coming over to the house to play, when she fell, backwards, hitting her head on the concrete below and dying instantly. Dana, who had been a few rungs on the ladder above Maggie, did not fall, which Lucy thought suspicious. At Maggie’s funeral, Lucy confronted Dana’s parents on the issue of whether their daughter maybe pushed Maggie, even if it was only as a bad joke. They said Dana didn’t and their condolences and left the funeral home with George’s sincerest apology. *Irish twins*, people whispered. *It’s the strangest thing.*

George and Lucy took separate cars to the cemetery. Lucy needed space.

“I’ll take Hurry home,” George told her, after the burial. Bernie was crying into the lapel of his suit from her place in his arms.

“No. Leave her here,” Lucy pleaded. “We’ll say goodbye together.”

When Lucy finally arrived at the Rotary Club, an hour late for the repast, without Bernadette, George didn’t wait to ask. He found his daughter sitting between her sisters’

headstones, shivering in a black coat. Pink wool mittens made to look like animal puppets hung from her sleeves.

“Don’t cry,” George cooed. “Don’t cry, Hurry, you’ll see them again.”

“See who?” Bernie had asked.

Almost thirty years later, everyone in Derby still knew at least a little something about the Wildashes. They knew about Mayor George Wildash, who had put up that clock tower in front of town hall at the indecent cost of \$800 and who used to smile. They knew about his widow, Lucy Miller, who supposedly never went past the front-yard, even if her paper was sitting just a few extra feet away. They knew about Bernie, who’d been engaged to Donny Larkin when his car skidded off the Lake Avenue overpass and onto Water Street traffic. Four people died, including Donny. And, seven months later, when Bernie was seen around town with a baby carriage, people knew that she’d been pregnant before they were even engaged.

It was poor taste to gossip about dead children, but it had become something of a Derby pastime to whisper about the Wildashes.

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Bernie steered the Toyota off Middle Ave. and into the parking lot of Delaney’s, and not the Crown County School of Nursing. It was ten minutes since she dropped the girls at Lucy’s. Bernadette Wildash was a thirty-one-year-old woman who still lied to her mother.

She was also the one to say Bill should pack his things and leave, but she hadn’t meant it. Or maybe she did. The truth was she didn’t know. It wasn’t the first time she’d used the words. Bernie and Bill were always having big fights, followed by days of hard silence that evolved back into peace between them. “Shyla, will you tell your father it’s time for dinner?” and “Angie, let your mother know the check for the cable company is on the nightstand.” That sort of thing. He’d been living away from the family in Woodhull for five months now.

Great, Bernie thought when she saw Susan Wix standing behind the hostess podium. “Just two, please.”

“Is Bill meeting you?” Sue asked. Bernie nodded. “The girls with your mom?” Another nod. “He was in here earlier, with Bud and Charlie.”

Bernie just smiled, a bit stupidly. She refused to ask Sue Wix for anything more than a drink. “Diet Coke, when you have the chance,” Bernie said, and Sue walked off disappointed.

It gave Bernie a small thrill to deny Sue Wix, formerly Sue Wix Bell, the opportunity to tell her about whatever she'd seen or heard when Bill was in. Sue was the second of Bill's ex-wives, and from what Bernie could tell, they were opposites. First off, Sue was an idiot. She'd been working at the restaurant forever, since she started there as a waitress back in high school, and she still seemed to think it was glamorous to show the good people of Derby to their tables. She had a bottle-blonde bob and always wore obvious colors, like red. Sue was thin in an athletic way. Bernie didn't get too caught up in looks, but everyone's only human and it bothered her sometimes that, at some point, she stopped paying so much attention to herself. She couldn't remember the last time she had a haircut.

When Bernie and Bill were first married, Sue thanked Bernie right in front of the registers at A&P for taking Bill off her hands. Never mind it had been five years since Sue divorced Bill and only five and a half since they married. *I'm so happy to pass on the Bell name to you, sweetheart.*

I'm keeping my name, actually. Bernie couldn't stand women who used terms of endearment to refer to other women, even strangers.

Sue took her time bringing the Coke. Bernie didn't bother with the menu. She'd eaten chicken nuggets with the girls, and besides, if she were going to eat at Delaney's, she'd have the chicken and waffle fries. That's what she always got. It's what she got on her first date with Bill, back when Delaney's was still called Penny Arcade and had green lampshades and no pool tables by the bar. New owners from out of town took over, but they kept the staff and the menu so no one minded. Everyone still called it the Penny Arcade. Even after they painted over the front sign, you could see the outline of *Penny* in the surface of the paint.

Bill was already fifteen minutes late when Bernie ran out to the Toyota to grab her nursing textbook. When he walked in, he'd see the textbook on the table and *Take that, Bill.* Bernie wasn't sure what it was about her return to school that would bother him, but she knew it would. For a second, Bernie considered heading over to college for the last two hours of class, but she hadn't paid for her soda yet, and by the time she did, well . . . it was the kind of stupid reason she always found to wait for Bill. She searched blindly with her hand for the lipstick in the glove compartment. It felt ridiculous to her, even as it was happening. Lipstick for a man who was already her husband. *Beggars can't be choosers*, Bernie heard Lucy saying, even if it only barely applied. But Bernie needed him to come home if someone was going to watch the girls when she started her clinical rotation at the hospital.

She couldn't raise them alone. They needed too many things: clothes, money for CCD, money to play soccer and for the doctors if they got sick. Shyla wanted to take ballet.

Smoothing her skirt as she slid back into the vinyl booth, Bernie wondered when exactly she had stopped wearing red. How about gold? And when had she started answering to the name *Mrs. Bell*?

"Bill hasn't phoned or anything," Sue Wix called out as she passed by.

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Bernie Wildash met Bill Bell at Derby Savings Bank. She was twenty-six, working as a teller; she wore a pillbox hat, like something from a movie or a Macy's ad. Bill eventually confessed to letting three customers cut ahead of him just to make sure he'd be assigned to her window. *Good day, sir*, she said, and he handed over his slips and checks without uttering a word. Bernie didn't remember the initial encounter at all. *Were you too nervous?* Bernie teased excitedly on their first date. Bill was the only man to ask her out since Donny's accident, since Angela was born. *Is that why you didn't ask me out right there and then?*

All Bill said was No. He was forty, with two ex-wives ghosting around Derby Town, where he'd also grown up. It wasn't long before Bernie ran into them both. Cindy Racanelli had been Bill's high school sweetheart. She stayed with him through junior college and college and his time in the service. She stayed with him through all the times they could plausibly live apart. Bill and Cindy divorced eight months after they married, which was just long enough to have opened every gift and sent out every thank you card. Bernie's parents went to the wedding on account of George and Mr. Racanelli knowing each other from high school. Lucy remembered all the details. It was a church ceremony.

Bernie had been seeing Bill for about six months when Cindy introduced herself at Crown Lanes. It was League Night. Cindy said to her, *Get out now, while he's still paying for things*, and Bernie laughed along. When Angela was born, Bernie became invisible to Derby Town. She was never asked on dates or invited to parties, even her five-year high school reunion, though her address hadn't changed. Bill Bell made Bernie an adult, finally, in the eyes of Derby and her mother.

"Are you in love with him?" Lucy had asked, quite uncharacteristically.

"I don't know. Sometimes, I think."

"I wouldn't be so picky, Hurry," her mother warned. "Beggars can't be choosers."

"But I'm not a beggar, Ma."

They'd been dating a year when Bill proposed marriage, at the beginning of summer. Bernie hesitated, prevaricated really, and Bill let it go, nearly like a gentleman. He even offered to accompany Bernie to Angela's Back-To-School Night when September arrived. It was the first time she didn't bring her mother, and Bernie, quite full of the gesture, told him she was ready now. *Ready to what?* was Bill's response, but wedding plans went ahead all the same. Then, on the Friday before the long Columbus Day Weekend, Bill demanded, for no good reason it seemed, it's now or never.

When he got to work on Tuesday morning, Bill confessed their elopement in Atlantic City to anyone who'd listen. Bernie's mind, however, was less made up on the subject, and she wished he would keep his voice down, at least around town, where word of the marriage was sure to reach her mother before she could.

"Have you changed your mind?" Bill asked her. He'd come to the bank on his lunch hour. It was just up the road from Derby Iron & Metal, where Bill worked for a time hauling scrap from the back of people's trucks onto big scales. Brass, tin, mostly stainless steel. The yard paid more for aluminum and copper wire, but hardly any came in most days.

"No, Billy. That's not it."

"Well?"

Bernie could see Bill thought he married her for love, and she was committed to loving him for it in return. "My mother was asleep when I got back last night, that's all."

"Did you try to wake her? What about this morning?"

Bernie just shook her head.

"Fine. You know what," Bill told her. "I've changed my mind."

"Don't be stupid, Billy. I'll tell her tonight."

"I'm not stupid."

"I know, Billy. I said don't be stupid."

When Bernie finally confessed to getting hitched in A.C., Lucy just shrugged and kept on folding laundry. "Well, that's one way to do it."

And suddenly Bernie was confused as to why she had ever assumed her mother would care.

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Bernie chased her Coke with a cup of decaf and a piece of gingerbread cake. Bill wasn't going to show, but it was still too early to turn up at Lucy's. How did it all become a

matter of where to sit and let her embarrassment play out? Bernie was angrier with herself than Bill, and she was most annoyed with Sue Wix, who came by every ten minutes to refill her cup. “You know, I probably shouldn’t say this, but Bill lost some money earlier playing pool.”

Bernie said no thanks to the refill. Bill’s ex-wives were everywhere, and Bernie was surprised by how little she cared for them. *You can have him*, she thought. But that was the joke, wasn’t it? They already had.

Everything had come so far without Bernie making a single decision. She had known Donny since they were kids; he was an accident, and his accident was an accident. Angela was an accident. Even marrying Bill. Bernie couldn’t remember doing it on purpose. What was she thinking?

Whenever Bernie tried to sort it out, from the beginning, she remembered Bill approaching her in the parking lot of the bank when she was about to go pick up Angie from the sitter.

“Bernadette.”

“Yes?” she asked with a disregarding look that would have sunk a younger man’s heart. But Bill Bell was every one of his forty years.

“I’m Bill Bell. You helped me out the other day with my deposit.”

“That’s right,” she said, taking him in. Taking in his camel coat and his Cutlass. She had no memory of him at all, just the instinct to fake it.

“Would you have dinner with me tonight?”

“Tonight? I can’t tonight.”

“Why not?”

She thought of Angie waiting for her, toys packed up and ready for home. “Prior commitment, I’m afraid.”

“You have a boyfriend? You’ll have to break up with him to be with me.”

You’ll have to.

Pulling a napkin from the dispenser, Bernie searched her bag for a pen. *You’ll have to.* That was the whole thing, it seemed to her now. The moment she could locate as both beginning and end.

Divorce my husband, she wrote down.

Visit the twins again, with Mom.

Bernie was so tired.

She left fifteen dollars on the table when the bill was much less. Otherwise, it would become an essential part of Sue's version of events where Bill was too ashamed to come to dinner with his wife, after losing money, and his wife was too broke to leave a tip, poor thing. Those Wildashes must be cursed.

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It was only a quarter past nine and class wouldn't dismiss until ten. Bernie walked slowly down the hallway of her mother's home, of her own childhood, pausing where she knew the floorboards to whine the worst. She'd always liked that about the house. How it could tell you when someone else was coming or going. How the house reminded you it was a house, that you were in something.

"The girls are asleep," Lucy whispered from her place at the dining room table. For as long as Bernie could remember, the dining room table was in the living room. It never made any sense and, somehow, this was the first she was noticing it.

"Ma, why's the table in here?" Bernie stood in the doorway that separated the living room from the hall, pulling her shirt from her body. It was the coolest spot in the house.

"It's always been here."

"Yeah, but why not put the table in the front room and back here have a room where people don't have to watch TV from the sofa looking over the mess on the table?"

"You can't put a table like this in the parlor, Bernadette."

'But no one even goes in there.'

"What if someone visits?"

"Like who, Ma?"

Lucy didn't answer.

"Ma, who's visiting?"

"Hurry," the word dragged in Lucy's mouth so that when it finally came out it was only a sound, something she had to work to free from the dry insides of her cheeks. "Hurry, a proper house has a parlor."

Bernie pulled out the chair opposite her mother.

"You look nice for school." Lucy tried to say it under her breath, but it came out loud as most people talked.

"I went to see Bill, in the end."

“I figured as much.”

It was the sort of infuriating thing only her mother would think to say. “Do you think we’d be okay if I left him?”

“Well . . .” Lucy didn’t say anything more so Bernie didn’t either. She hoped her mother might be thinking hard on something to help. Bernie didn’t shy from hard work, but all her days felt long lately. She would give everything, anything at all, if just this once someone would show her the next right move. “Well, what’s that matter, really, Hurry? Shyla was asking me about the end of the world.”

Help the girls always, Bernie thought. Help them until they hate you for nosing in.

“I know. She got to watching some movie with Angie and it would have been a battle between them to turn it off.”

“The last movie I saw was *On Golden Pond*. Saw it with you and Daddy.”

Bernie laughed lightly. She remembered the night well, but not for any good reason. Just because some memories are brighter, because maybe the light was different, or the weather was peculiar, or the truth was far away or nearby. They saw *On Golden Pond* just after Donny died. “Do you think Daddy would like Derby now?”

“Oh, how could I know that?” Lucy shifted her eyes to the 11 o’clock news. “She asked me when it would end exactly.”

“Huh,” Bernie said flatly, reaching across the table for a taste of her mother’s tea. “What’d you tell her?”

“There’s more tea, if you’d like.”

Bernie nodded.

“I told her fifty years,” Lucy added on her way to the kitchen.

“Why’d you tell her that?”

“It’s what I think. What do you care? You’ll probably be dead before that.”

“Great, Ma,” Bernie said, finishing her mother’s cup in the meantime. “But the girls won’t be.”

“It’s better that way.”

Lucy’s hand shook against the weight of the full cup as she settled it before her daughter, a small amount of tea dribbling down the side. “What’s better, Mom?”

“You won’t have to worry about them anymore.”

Bernie nodded. She was never really surprised by Lucy's moroseness. It wasn't a reaction to anything. It was just a part of her, like how some people are thoughtful and some are bubbly. Lucy was just a sad case. "Well, that's one way of looking at it."

"You can't leave Bill, Bernadette."

"Says who?"

"Well, God for one."

"I thought you said God didn't want me to marry him in the first place."

Bernie wanted to ask if Lucy had ever considered leaving Daddy when things were bad, but knew better. It was too close a question, she knew, but she wondered how she came to know that. Maybe someone else wouldn't think it was too close at all. How had Bernie picked up on everything? She hadn't meant to; she wasn't even sure Lucy meant to teach it.

"You should finish nursing school first. Think about it then."

"So God doesn't mind if you leave your husband so long as you have a degree?"

"God's not the only thing. You know that. There are other things."

Lucy was always bringing in some new, extraneous fact to collapse a conversation. Like last week, in their discussion on the best value detergent, Bernie compared price, and volume, how it smelled, and which had the best cup for pouring. Lucy just said, "I use my own cup," and walked away as if that had settled every other issue, including what God might expect of someone who wasn't that sure about God in the first place. Lucy had a terribly easy way of reminding you that the world is bigger than you are. She could reduce her daughter to ash without noticing. Without wanting or trying.

"It's only a few more years," Bernie agreed, thinking ashamedly on the napkin in her glove compartment, on the list of things she'd never do and the traces of red wine lipstick she'd left on her mother's teacup. "I guess that's what's right."