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Quietly

Julie has never had a broken bone, which frustrates her. She likes the idea of being a little world-weary and thinks she's mostly there, but a bone that wasn't quite smooth, one with a story behind it, would help. Yesterday she had tripped over the cat and fallen down the apartment stairs, then lay sprawled and hurting for as long as she could, wishing for someone to come by. After a few minutes she was disgusted with herself and got up. Nothing broken. She presses her bruised knee, then slaps the rubber spatula against the side of the bowl and stares through a clear patch on the steamy window. The driveway is empty. Anna has forgotten her promise to be home for breakfast. She has been living with Julie since leaving her husband nineteen days ago. The wedding had been six months before, at night and very beautiful. Julie had been the maid of honor and had wished very badly, through tears, to have a love that was the object of so much attention.

Anna's cat, Beastie, is sitting in the center of the table Julie has set with blue and white checkered placemats, a spray of bluebonnets from her neighbor's garden, and the hollow ceramic cow full of cream. Julie shoos him off. Anna's mug is full of coffee, and her stack of buttered pancakes waits, cooling. It is seven-thirty; Julie decides to give her five more minutes and then leave for work.

Julie takes three aspirin, more for the feeling of actively trying to improve her mood than for the gentle pull of oncoming cramps, then turns on the radio by the sink and smiles as bright strains of sloppy jazz fill the kitchen. She sways a little, twirls, hands up, and steps in the cat's water dish. Beastie looks at her blankly and opens his mouth in a silent mew. "Quiet," she tells him, and puts her finger to her lips. There is tough skin on the edge of her thumbnail, and permanent lines the rich soil has stained onto her fingers.

Gloves are provided at the seed lab but she feels that she's cheating if she doesn't get her hands dirty, though she sometimes wishes for smooth, clean hands like Anna's.

Anna often teases Julie about the monotony of the job but Julie loves the smooth cycles of planting and counting the tiny seeds. When she closes her eyes she sometimes sees the black soil, speckled with the impossibly small white seeds, and it comforts her. Even when she is not working she feels a soothing rhythm in the ghost movements of her arms and fingers, and at times, wonders if the motion is now part of her, a knowledge that will never leave.

There is a clatter in the yard. Anna is bent over her old black bicycle, muttering, her hair tucked into the neck of her sweater. Julie sits back down at the table and takes a sip of her coffee, dripping it in a dark line down the front of her t-shirt.

Anna clomps up the stairs and pushes the back door open, smiling. Her cheeks are very red. "Ooh, I had the most wonderful night," she says. "You won't believe what I did."

"I'm sure you're right," Julie says. "I made you some breakfast."

"God, that's so sweet." Anna shrugs off her backpack, sits across from Julie and spreads a napkin across her lap. "So, how's everything? I haven't seen you for days!" She spreads jam on her pancake and rolls it up.

"I fell down the stairs yesterday."

"You what? How did you manage that?" Anna asks with her mouth full.

"I was trying to get your stupid cat, and of course, wearing my new shoes with the three inch heels. Now every time I walk down the steps my legs feel shaky, like I'm on a high bridge."

Anna throws back her head and laughs too loudly. "You poor thing."

"It's Friday," Julie says, finally. "Remember?"

"Remember what?"

Julie waits, watching Anna chew. “Forget it. Where have you been? With Wesley?”

Anna shakes her head. “Julie, I can’t tell you how happy I am!” She bites her upper lip and pats her chest to calm herself. “I feel like I can breathe again,” she says. She looks into her coffee mug. “I mean it, I was dying.”

There is a grey smudge of grease on Anna’s temple. “I know,” Julie says, used to the dramatics. She looks at the creamy brown rings on the table where her coffee has slipped over the edge of her mug.

“Julie, I couldn’t function when I was with Sam. I mean, I’d stopped brushing my teeth.”

Julie pats Anna’s cheek. She can’t imagine going to bed with dirty teeth. Then again she can’t imagine going to bed with some of the men that Anna has, either. “And how is the ex?” Julie asks, hoping to see a sign of discomfort or sadness. “Have you talked to him?”

Anna smiles and shakes her head. “That word,” she says. “Ex. I can’t believe I have an ex-husband.”

“Jenna from the coffee shop said he’s still completely stunned.”

“I talked to him yesterday.” Anna pulls a fallen hair from where it is resting on her shoulder and looks at it. “He’ll make it. He wasn’t happy, either. I was crazy to get married at twenty-two. Somebody should’ve told me.”

“Like you would’ve listened.” Julie looks at Anna’s sparse eyebrows. She is a striking woman. Her teeth are a little crooked, but men do not seem bothered by this. Instead they notice her wonderful laugh and thin tanned legs.

“Well, at least I know now. I’ve been really connecting with people lately. There’s all this good energy flowing around.” Anna smiles around the kitchen as if to show Julie that the energy lives, even here, if she would be willing to feel it.

Anna's face is like a lovely plate, smooth, something one would be tempted to collect and hang on a wall. Julie sips her coffee. Though she would not choose the words Anna does, lately she has felt surges of hope, joy. She hadn't thought about Greg, the man she used to love, for weeks, but yesterday received a friendly postcard, a night shot of the Hollywood sign, sent care of the seed lab.

Julie hadn't called him when she lost the baby. She doesn't know why. Maybe she should have. Maybe he wouldn't have come over, worse, maybe he would find it was, all of it, somehow, wrong. She had sat on the toilet and felt the blood leave her, a great slow wash of bright red, thickened with clots, and nothing more. She could not get up, even after she'd stopped bleeding, after her downstairs neighbors had turned off their loud TV and gone to bed, after the two o'clock train had shaken the apartment. She'd closed her eyes and cried without making any sound, holding herself and rocking slowly back and forth. The air seemed heavy; she could feel it pushing against her skin.

Anna waves her fingers in front of Julie's eyes. "Yoo-hoo," she sings. "Listen to me. There's a party tonight and you're going. It's going to be amazing—tons of men," Anna says. "An abundance. And I'm not going unless you do."

"The only kind of men found in abundance in this town are shut up in tiny cubicles all day, just waiting to fill a room with bravado."

"Come on Julie, these are nice guys. Maybe a little loud, but let me tell you—a calm man quickly turns into someone who wants to go to sleep at ten o'clock and gets pissed if you touch him or talk to him when he's thinking, or reading, or tired. I'm serious; trust me on this one."

"Anna, I don't even want to meet anyone."

"Sure you don't."

When Julie is looking for a man to be with she feels like someone lost, worriedly searching for a familiar place to sit down. She doesn't approve of herself when she is that restless, thinks that she should be serene and content on her own. Presently, Anna is

dating, or sleeping with, a man named Wesley, and says the thing she likes most is his beautiful, wavy red hair. Julie has seen him once, driving a blue Nova and eating a handful of chips, and thinks he looks like a rooster. Though Anna met him three weeks before she and Sam separated, he was certainly not the only reason for their break-up.

“Okay, so listen,” Anna says. “You’re not going to believe what I did.”

“Let’s see,” she says, “I’ll bet it’s regarding a man.”

“Not singular, sweetie. Okay, so Wesley and I went to this thing with his work on Thursday night and I met his best friend, Scott. Scott just broke up with his girlfriend so we talked a lot about relationships and sex and stuff.”

“And stuff? Where was Wesley while all this was happening?”

Anna smiles, a flash of simple cunning. She rubs her neck and looks at the ceiling.

“So you slept with Scott?”

“Yep.”

“Does Wesley know?”

“Nope. But he always says he doesn’t want to direct his energy toward a ‘boyfriend-girlfriend’ type thing.”

“That’s okay with you?”

“He’s got his own stuff going on,” Anna says. “Anyway, I don’t need someone to take care of me.”

“I guess you don’t need to worry about that with Wesley.”

“It’s not that he doesn’t want to be with me, he’s just not obsessed. We’ve got our own lives, you know. We enjoy each other.”

“Yeah, and each other’s friends.”

“Come on, Julie. It was really amazing. Scott said some wonderful things.” Anna nods at Julie, slowly, as if waiting for permission to be still.

“So what now? Are you going to tell Wesley?”

“I don’t know,” says Anna. “Maybe he already knows. Maybe he’ll get jealous.” She scratches at a spot on the placemat, picks up her mug and holds it in front of her mouth.

“Anna, be careful, okay? You’re vulnerable. You don’t think so, but you are.”

Anna smiles at her, pats her on the shoulder. “Stop worrying,” she says. “I don’t want anything serious. I’ve done the ring thing, and I’m not going to do it again.”

“Okay,” Julie says.

“Anyway, it’s not *just* sex,” Anna says.

“Right.”

Anna groans and puts her forehead on the table. “Why did I get married? I was so stupid!”

“No, you were hopeful. How could you know what was going to happen?”

“I did,” Anna says. “I knew it wasn’t going to work.”

“You didn’t really. You couldn’t.”

“Just like sleeping with Scott, I mean, it’s not as if I didn’t know what I was doing. I always know,” Anna says. “Always. Want to know what he said to me?”

“Tell me.”

“When we were having sex he just looked at me for the longest time and then made this little noise, kind of a whimper, and he said, ‘Oh, you are the most *beautiful* thing.’”

“Anna, of course you are,” Julie says. She smooths Anna’s hair off her forehead. “You know you are.”

“You’re right,” Anna says, and laughs because she knows Julie will forgive her. “Of course I am.”

That evening Julie sits on the lid of the toilet seat watching Anna lean close to her bathroom mirror, pull the skin above her eye taut, and pluck out a stray eyebrow hair.

“Do you know that I could waste my whole life doing this?” Anna says. “I’m serious. I’ll be washing dishes or bleaching towels and suddenly I find myself in the bathroom with my face up to the mirror and tweezers in my hand.”

Julie nods at her friend. She is wearing her favorite black dress, and knows she looks good, though when she went outside to get some aspirin from the car a man in a pickup had whistled at her and now she is afraid there is something wrong with the way she looks, that she is laughable. Anna had wanted to dye her hair deep red for the party, but now says red lipstick is definitely enough, worn with two strands of pearls, obviously fake and tinted a light blue.

“A very daring look,” Julie says, trying to smooth the skin of her fingertips with an Emory board. Her abdomen is tender and swollen, and she has no doubt that she will start bleeding as soon as they arrive at the party.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Anna says. “But if you look beautiful and a little bit goofy at the same time, people are less intimidated. They like you more.”

“Who knew?” Julie says, squinting at herself in the shiny top of Anna’s tube of lipstick. She has no formula for success and simply hopes she won’t be hung over tomorrow.

Anna bares her teeth at the mirror, wipes off a spot of lipstick. “I wonder if Wesley’s coming,” she says.

“How would you possibly have enough energy for that many men?” Julie asks. “And it will certainly be exhausting for me, since I’m the one who will have to follow you with a big stick to keep them under control.”

Anna laughs and combs her hair with her fingers.

“I’ll make them wait their turn,” Julie says. She wishes for Anna to say that she is being ridiculous, that not every man is a sure thing for her.

“Julie, you’ll have a great time. And if you don’t you don’t have to stay.”

“I’m not going to just leave you there,” Julie says. “What kind of a friend would leave you alone in a house full of strange men?”

“A good friend?” Anna laughs.

“You want me to just leave you there with whoever you happen to be hanging on?”

“I need to have a really good time,” Anna says. She pulls on her bra strap. “I need to forget about Wesley and just be wild and on my own.”

Julie rubs her fingertips under her chin. “I think all I really need is a dependable nail file,” she says.

Anna twists her hair above her head, then lets it fall smooth over her shoulders. “Believe me, I need plenty more than that,” she says.

“You know, wants and needs aren’t quite the same thing,” Julie says. She wants to be forceful, a little bit mean.

“I hear you,” Anna says. “Can we go now?”

The house is hot and crowded. It smells of beer and smoke and cologne. The host’s name is Jim; he has a patchy black goatee and a nervous laugh. “God, I love women who know how to dress,” he says, looking desperately at Anna. Julie goes to get some wine, not wanting to hear Anna’s gorgeous laughter. Julie has often thought that women like Anna must have a sign on their forehead that says “SEX”; a sign that only men can read. When Anna walks into a room full of men, or even talks to a man, she seems different, taller and full of something dark and dangerous. It used to fascinate Julie, make her proud, but tonight it makes her very aware that she has been sleeping alone for nearly a year. She has had more than a few men in her life, men that are not around anymore. Julie had always thought that she was stronger than they were and wouldn’t be crushed if they left, and had thought in fact, that she wasn’t hurt at all, but watching Anna sway beautifully toward Jim, she suddenly feels a dull ache behind her

breastbone and has to sit down. She holds the stem of her wine glass carefully, feeling that she could easily snap it in half.

The flames of six tapered candles on the mantle waver orange in unison and Julie looks around the room. There are a lot of men, most wearing nice sweaters, all talking loudly, seeming to cheer in loud bursts.

“That woman looks like she came straight from Good Will,” Anna says, as she sits next to Julie. “Over there,” she says, nodding toward a full-figure in green corduroy and a beret. “Jesus. Hey, are you okay?”

Julie looks at the pinstriped fabric of the couch, dizzied. “No,” she says.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t worry about it, okay? This is your night; you’ve got to meet your quota,” Julie says.

Anna looks at her, her eyes very round. She opens her red mouth and then closes it. Julie is immediately sorry.

“You don’t think much of me, do you?” Anna asks. She pulls on her pearls so one strand is very long, the other tight around her neck. “You don’t. I didn’t realize. God, I’m an idiot.”

Julie doesn’t know what to say. She can already feel the warmth of the wine moving through her arms, her chest.

Anna is about to cry.

Julie looks around, panicked. She knows she can’t listen to Anna tonight, doesn’t want to watch Anna’s effect on the throng of aged fraternity boys. The musky smell of the room is overwhelming.

“Anna,” calls Jim, now slightly drunk and less nervous, “come here, you.” He’s standing in the kitchen in a group of laughing people. Julie turns and sees someone holding a bottle of tequila, shaking it like a tambourine.

“Shots,” she says, taking Anna’s wrist. “Come on, we’ll feel better.”

Julie and Anna sit in the calico wallpapered kitchen, facing each other. Someone with a loud gravelly voice is holding the refrigerator door open, talking about imported beer and his fear of living in the real world. The cold air settles around Julie's feet as she pours the drinks. Jim is standing behind Anna with his hand on the back of her chair. She doesn't talk to him; she watches Julie fill and refill their glasses. Eventually Jim shuffles away, and the room slowly clears of smoke and people, the party drifting into the living room, the backyard, various bedrooms. Julie and Anna are silent until they have each had four shots of tequila.

Anna sprinkles salt on her hand and waits for Julie to pour again. She looks at the fake knotted wood of the table. "You think I'm crazy," she says. "You think I'll sleep with anyone."

"You will," Julie says. She glances toward the living room.

Anna shakes her glass in protest. "I never cheated on Sam until the very end."

"You were only married six months, Anna."

"But I was faithful."

"You don't think I remember?" Julie says, splashing tequila on the table. "You always tell me what you do. You tell me like I'm begging to hear everything."

"You're my friend," Anna says.

Julie nods and traces her finger around the rim of her glass. "I have stories, too."

"What do you mean?" Anna says. She rests her head on the table.

"You always talk like you're the only one who has anything to say."

"But I just ended my marriage," Anna says. "I needed to talk to you. You always listen."

"Like I had a choice," Julie says. "No one can resist you."

"Not true," Anna says, and thumps her empty glass on the table. "You don't know everything, Julie. Now pour me another," she says. "I want to be at ease."

“Christ,” Julie says, softly. She pours and watches Anna drink.

“Don’t be mad,” Anna says, before she pitches forward and knocks her head on the table. “I’m dying,” she whispers, looking up at Julie with her cheek against the wood. “You’ve got to help me.”

Julie steers her into the bathroom and wipes off the filthy toilet rim with tissue before Anna bends her head into the bowl. When she gets up her forehead is damp and her hair stringy around her face. “You are the greatest friend,” Anna says, putting her arms around Julie and resting her head on her shoulder. As they are coming out of the bathroom a man in a white t-shirt picks Anna up and carries her to the couch.

Julie falls asleep near her with her head on the coffee table. When she wakes it is very dark. She can barely see Anna, then her eyes adjust and she sees Anna’s legs and arms wrapped around someone. She feels the world buckle beneath her. When she lifts her head again it is much later, the room has changed, emptied. She closes her eyes.

Suddenly Anna is shaking her awake; her mascara is in a black smudge on her left cheekbone, her hair crazy. “I think Jim went to bed,” she says, worried.

“Who’s Jim?” Julie asks, rubbing her eye. She can feel a welt around her waist from the band of her nylons.

“You know, the guy who owns the house.”

“So, go find him,” Julie says.

Anna nods, but she’s shaking. “I need your help,” she says. “I can’t do it by myself.”

Julie steers her by the shoulders through the kitchen toward the back of the house. They stand in front of the first bedroom door in the hallway. Beside it is a picture of an old boot, framed in gilt. Julie looks at Anna. “You really want to do this?”

“Please,” Anna whispers.

Julie knocks and after a moment a man wearing yellow and white striped boxer shorts opens the door.

“Him?”

“Yeah,” Anna says.

Julie gently pushes her toward him; he takes her hands and pulls her inside.

“Where did you go, honey?” he asks. Anna doesn’t look back at Julie, but Jim winks at her and whispers, “Thanks.”

Julie sits on the living room couch in the dark. A murmuring from one of the bedrooms, a soft cooing sound, makes her press her hands to her stomach, feeling for life, movement. She knows it is ridiculous to consider herself a mother; she had been pregnant less than four months, but it seems to have changed something in her. She *had* been a mother, and there is never a moment when she doesn’t find herself still longing for that child. She might never have another, but she would always know what it was like to create a life and carry it.

She wonders what it is she truly wants from Anna. Did she simply want her power over men, her lanky grace and irrepressible spirit? Maybe, though she suspects she mostly wants recognition, some acknowledgement that her own willingness to listen and support Anna was part of what made Anna’s recklessness possible. Whatever Anna did, Julie would listen, would offer support. An unwavering ‘yes’ vote, an unconditional understanding, carries a lot of weight in the world, and Julie if had ever had that, from anyone who hadn’t simply wanted to sleep with her, perhaps she would have attempted things that she now never dreamt of.

Outside the July air is still warm and Julie stands on the sidewalk for a moment, breathing deeply. The signals at the corner are blinking yellow and the cars on the road seem powered only by their blaring radios. She is not afraid of being assaulted, but each time she hears an engine traveling toward her she worries that someone will lean out the window and yell something vicious. She walks slowly, looking at the milky sky under the streetlights, smelling newly laid asphalt and grass clippings which overflow two trash bags by the curb. She feels bruised, alone, and wonders what is wrong with her, why no

one loves her. When she was pregnant she had been content, amazed, to feel the life being drawn from her, feel the child taking the food she ate. She'd been slightly distracted, as if concentrating on being needed. Julie remembers Anna, beautiful and eager, in bed with a man with yellow and white striped boxers, and wants to scold her, humiliate her, rescue her. She stops walking and turns around. She starts to run along the dark streets toward her friend, and then feels the warm, slow release of blood between her legs.

The back door is unlocked and Julie opens it slowly, steps inside and stands in the entryway, listening. She moves through the messy kitchen into the front room, straining her eyes to keep from stumbling, and down the hallway. In the bathroom she cleans herself as best she can with toilet paper and gets a pad from her purse.

Julie pushes Jim's bedroom door open quietly and looks in. Anna is sitting on the edge of the bed, naked, staring at the floor. She is beautiful, young and lost against the jumble of dark covers. Jim turns over, murmurs, "I know, I know."

Anna looks at him and shakes her head. She wraps her arms around herself, then sees Julie and jumps.

"Oh Jesus, Julie," she whispers. Julie picks up a t-shirt from the floor and pulls it over Anna's head and shoulders, finds Anna's crumpled dress by the bed and hands it to her, then leads her through the bottle-cluttered living room and out the front door. The moon is bright and swollen in the gray sky. Anna sinks to her knees on the pavement.

"I'm a fucking failure," she says. Her eyes are bloodshot.

"Why? You got another one, Wesley will be jealous, and we'll have something to talk about over coffee," Julie says. She can't believe how mean she feels, how sorry.

Anna is sobbing now, her breath catching in sharp gasps. "Don't Julie, please. Please."

Julie watches her, astonished at the raw pain on her friend's face. She has never believed that Anna had anything to cry about.

“I was so alone,” Anna whispers. “I didn’t know what to do. But I didn’t try. I didn’t try hard enough.”

Julie kneels and puts her arms around her, shushes into her hair. “It’s over now,” she says. “It’s okay.” She says it again and again, to Anna and herself and her lost child. The wind moves her shirt against her back and touches her hair gently. She feels Anna’s warm forehead against her cheek, the throbbing silence of the night air, and is overjoyed.

“Julie?” Anna says, her voice muffled against Julie’s shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“What are you thinking about?”

Julie doesn’t know how to tell Anna anything. “I’m happy,” she says, quietly.

“What else?”

She rocks Anna in her arms, feeling the rough concrete biting at her knees. “I was feeling like a mother,” she says.

“Because I’m childish?”

“No,” Julie says, and smiles. “Well, partly. There are just some things you don’t know about me,” she says. The air is very cold around her lips. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

“Talk, Julie,” Anna says. “I’ll be very still. I won’t interrupt.”

Julie looks up at the sky. She sees that it is sprinkled with millions of tiny white seeds. “I’m trying,” she says.