One - December 25th, 11:00am

My mother asked me to kill my father on Christmas. I remember it was Christmas, because it isn't the kind of thing you forget. And if I have to pick a beginning for this tragedy that's as good a place as any. Aristotle was wrong, you know. Tragedies don't have structure. They don't line up neatly into three acts. Tragedy prefers the blindside. You're sitting at the intersection waiting for the light, when *Bam!* it comes out of nowhere.

I'd just checked on my teenage son, Jax. He'd sequestered himself in the guest room far from his cousins, which given the finger-breaking incident was probably the safest choice. Then, I stopped to look in on my sister's kids in the living room. She'd asked me to keep an eye on the younger ones while she hunted the Valley for cranberry sauce.

Mom had forgotten this holiday staple and was frantically scolding herself in the kitchen because cranberry sauce, *whole* cranberry sauce, was my father's favorite part of Christmas dinner. For fifty years she'd been getting up at the crack of dawn to make turkey, stuffing, brussels sprouts and this weird marshmallow ambrosia, yet my father's favorite dish came out of a can.

I'd only meant to glance at Colleen's kids then go help Mom, but something about the scene transfixed me. The floor was littered with bows and wrapping paper, like Santa's workshop had exploded and these five kids were the only survivors. It was like looking back through a window in time.

Colleen, our older brother Adam, and I had celebrated every Christmas of our youth in that living room. Our parents always made it magical. You'd get something you'd forgotten you

wanted or didn't even know you wanted. You went to sleep on Christmas Eve with this feeling, this luscious anticipation of magic, certain that something totally unexpected was not only possible, but was about to happen. When was the last time I felt like that? Like life could surprise you and it would be good.

A screech shattered the moment.

"Raaaannce!!" Luca howled.

Lance, Colleen's eight-year-old, had grabbed his little brother's Thomas the Train and was holding it high above his head, laughing while Luca stood on his tippy-toes desperately reaching for the toy, his bright orange-red hair bursting in all directions as if it were screaming too.

"Lance!" I snapped.

Lance ignored me and kept taunting his brother. Mostly my sister's kids are saints. She has nine, though only five are still young enough to be at home. They say *please* and *thank you* without being reminded, do dishes without being asked. But not Lance. He's a dick which, when I'm not actually dealing with him, is relatively satisfying. A chink, a lot too late, in Colleen's otherwise halcyon existence.

"Lance!" I repeated. He turned and stared, his green eyes burning. He wasn't scared of me. We both knew it. I could trek back downstairs to get his dad, but Liam was no match for this little nightmare either.

The only real leverage anyone had was how much trouble he'd be in with Colleen if she found out. He was sizing up how likely it was that I'd call on my sister to do the dirty work. He scowled, then handed the train back to his brother.

"And tidy up before your mom gets back," I added before heading out of the room.

The kitchen was sweltering, over-heated from the efforts of the ancient oven to produce yet another family feast. In classic Los Angeles fashion, it was eighty degrees outside, and the kitchen was at least ten degrees hotter than that. I wished I was the one off hunting cranberries. Colleen had volunteered the second Mom mentioned the cranberry sauce, before I even registered it as an opportunity to escape. The house felt more cramped and uneasy every year, maybe because all the kids were getting bigger, or maybe because of Dad and his dementia.

Mom grabbed the oven door and gave it a tug. Her short, grey hair fluttered in the gust of heat that escaped. She slid the turkey out and, with her fingertips, carefully flicked at the edge of the aluminum foil tent covering the bird. Steam rose up from the pan as she got it loose.

"I can't take this anymore," she said without looking at me. It was as though she was scolding the bird for its lack of appreciation. She retrieved a ladle from the counter and began basting the turkey with its juices. I glanced around. Every surface was cluttered with bowls and utensils. She'd probably been up since five, preparing this enormous Christmas meal for a bunch people, including me, who really didn't recognize how much work it was.

"Maybe we should do a *potluck* next year," I said teasingly, knowing she'd never go for it. Her disdain for potlucks was legendary. Working yourself to death in the kitchen—particularly on holidays—fulfilled some recondite, motherly obligation handed down from previous generations.

"Bernadette Louise Rogers," she snapped, letting the oven door slam shut. "You have *Christmas* dinner and a *Christmas* tree on *Christmas*."

Her sharp tone surprised me. I only got my full name when in trouble, which was

infinitely better than Bernie, the nickname I'd been trying to kill for more than forty years.

"I was just kidding," I said. My nonchalant attitude towards traditional holidays, even before Shayne, always irked her—I've never had a tree in my adult life—but her emotion seemed disproportionate to my attempt at humor. "Why do you think I come here every year? I love that everything is exactly the same as it was when I was a kid."

"I'm sorry," she said but she didn't sound any less upset. "It's just…" She stopped, then stood there, her cheeks flushed and shiny with sweat. She seemed to be focusing on something internal, gathering up all her emotions and stuffing them away in some sacred hiding spot like she had my whole life. She picked up a stack of plates from the counter and handed them to me. "Go set the table."

Confused, I went through the other door of the kitchen to the dining area. She was probably just tired, that heat could give anyone a crispy edge. I laid out the plates, the same everyday dishes we'd had as kids. When I came across the chipped one, I deliberately set it in my sister's spot, then felt guilty and went back and switched it to mine. Mom was working on the brussels sprouts when I returned, slicing an X into the bottom of each one then tossing it into the pot of boiling water on the stove.

"You have to do something," she said, still not looking at me.

"Do you want me to make the stuffing?"

She turned. Her face tightened, and the section of skin between her eyebrows gathered together in furrows of disappointment.

"That's not what I mean," she said.

I was failing her, not deciphering subtle expressions the way I was supposed to, the way

I'd been able to when I was little and well-versed in this language of looks, where the slight shift of an eyebrow meant she'd seen through a fib and was about to deliver a spanking. I replayed the holiday in my mind trying to find the Rosetta stone that would help me translate the conversation we were having into usable information. I couldn't.

"Mom, I give up. I don't know what we're talking about."

"If he knew this was going to happen to him, he would have gone out in the backyard and blown his brains out."

Aha! We were talking about Dad. I nodded. Whenever the subject of Alzheimer's or terminal cancer came up he'd say those exact words: "Don't let me get like that. I'd rather go out in the backyard and blow my brains out." It was stupid really. Something people say but don't think will never happen. He didn't own a gun. I'm not even sure how well he could use one. He'd been a radio operator in the Navy in a time of peace. I'd never seen him touch a firearm.

"What can I do?" I asked. We'd tried having someone stay with him at the house, so Mom could get out once or twice a week. A home health agency sent a sweet, middle-aged Hispanic woman named Magda. Mom was only a few blocks away driving with Colleen's daughter Laura to the mall when a terrified Magda called. Dad had accused her of stealing and locked her outside. The next time they sent a tall, muscular guy named Walter. Dad punched him. The agency told us not to call again.

"Do you want to try an adult daycare place?" I said, when she didn't respond.

"They won't take him because he's aggressive." The word caught in her throat. My dad would never have been described as aggressive by anyone before the dementia.

"A nursing home?" I said, even though I knew better.

"No, no, no," she said, getting a little louder with each word.

"Then, what? What am I supposed to do?"

"You could help him go peacefully," she said, her voice a hopeful whisper. "You know how to do that."

I stood there waiting for her to say more, to explain, because she couldn't possibly be saying what I thought she was. But there was no more.

"Mom? What do you mean help him go peacefully? It sounds like you're asking me to *kill* Dad."

She stared, her expression hovering somewhere between blank and quizzical, like I'd come out of nowhere with this idea and she was trying to figure out what *I* meant instead of me trying to figure out what *she* meant. But then she gave an almost imperceptible nod, as if by not saying the words she was doing something less than committing, was somehow retaining plausible deniability.

"I thought things were okay," I said, even though things hadn't been okay in years. But I thought they were as okay as they could be under the circumstances. She turned back to her salad, opened a jar of disconcertingly bright red cherry halves and laid them in the shape of a flower on the white bed of marshmallows, something I'd seen her do so many times it was reassuring.

"You have to tell me what's going on," I said. "I can't do anything if I don't know what's going on."

"He's getting up in the middle of the night and going for walks. He keeps asking me to take him home. When I tell him this is home, he gets angry. When we were driving last week, he

told me to take him home then grabbed the wheel. I had to scream at him to get him to let go. I thought we were going to have an accident."

"Grandma?" The voice came from the doorway behind me. I turned to see my nephew Logan, who although the same age as Jax, seemed more child-like, innocent. "I can't find Grandpa."

My mother took a deep breath, her shoulders and chest rising as her rib cage filled with air. Her small-frame, thin limbs and tiny hands, had always made her seem delicate, bird-like, which only became more pronounced with her shrinking. When I was sixteen, she and I were the same height. Now at forty-seven and seventy-two, I was still five-three but she was barely five feet. The big inhale made her seem like a diminutive creature puffing itself up to look bigger so as not to get consumed by a predator. She let the breath out in a huge sigh.

"We're not done, okay?" I said to my mother, then turned to Logan. "You check the TV room. I'll check the workshop."

He nodded and left. We all knew the drill.

Two - December 25th, 11:15am

I walked through the dining room and out to the back balcony. I made a quick survey of the empty yard below, then stepped back into the house.

"Is the workshop locked?" I shouted to my mom who remained in the kitchen, apparently not intending to join the search for Dad.

"He has a million extra keys," Mom said, which only sort of answered the question but

was completely clear to me. Colleen and I had suggested she change the lock, but she refused. Every time Mom took away Dad's keys, he managed to find them or come up with yet another spare set. It was like he had a collection stashed somewhere, as if he suspected people in the future were going to conspire against him and he'd planned ahead.

Mom said if she changed the lock, they'd be in a constant battle, which since she was the one living with him, we had to respect. But a man with no short-term memory and access to power tools felt like a recipe for disaster. Logan was coming up the stairs from the TV room, as I was going down. Even without the head shake, I knew from his face that Dad wasn't in the TV room.

"Can you check out front?" I said.

Logan nodded.

I crossed through my parents' room to the back balcony. As I opened the sliding glass door, I kicked off my clogs. Bare feet were safer on the ladder-like, wooden steps down to the backyard that Adam, with his penchant for naming things, had dubbed the "death stairs" when we were kids.

My parents' modest two-story house followed a common design of hillside homes in the San Fernando Valley. It was inverted. The top story, with the kitchen, living room, and garage, was at road level. The bedrooms were on the story below. You got to the backyard, which was relatively flat because the house was at the base of the hill, via the death stairs or by walking down around the side of the house.

As I went down the steps, I tried to will the future into existence. Dad would be in the workshop when I got down there. I'd walk in, promise him a cold beer, and we'd go back up into

the house. It wasn't far-fetched. A lot of the time when you couldn't find Dad, he was fiddling with tools and shuffling boxes in the workshop, his body and hands remembering old skills and knowledge that his brain had long forgotten.

My hopes dwindled when I got to the bottom of the stairs however. The workshop door was closed. He never closed it when he was in there. But you couldn't count on things that used to be certainties, so I treaded along the crunchy, dry grass to check.

The half-finished story under the house contained Adam's old bachelor pad on the side and dad's workshop at the back. The workshop was this wedge-shape where Dad had put in a floor and shelves. If you were facing the door, it seemed like you were in a square room. But if you turned around, you were looking into the ever-shrinking space where the dirt of the hill rose to meet the bottom of the house, an area Adam had christened the Bermuda Triangle.

I opened the door and turned on the light, glancing around as if Dad's presence wouldn't be obvious, as if he might be hidden amongst the muddle of worn boxes scattered across the shelves, a microcosm of his mind: things slowly drifting out of place until all that was left was a jumble.

My dad had crafted under-appreciated masterpieces here while us kids played in the yard —chicken coop for Colleen's 4-H project, jungle gym for Adam, playhouse for me—but at some point, the three of us always ended up in that strange, shadowy angle under the house, daring each other to go farther and farther into the Bermuda Triangle, searching for the invisible portal we imagined there. A spot where you could cross into another dimension.

"One day something's going to pull you in," Dad used to say, which always made me dart back out certain I felt something reaching for me.

Every time I came in here looking for him, I checked that dark space under the house, as if I might catch him returning from another plane. But, of course, there was no Dad. I turned off the lights and headed back toward the stairs.

Logan was standing in the center of the kitchen when I returned. He frowned and shook his head. Mom stayed unduly focused on the meal as if she were more concerned about the mashed potatoes than my Dad, which was weird. Normally, she'd already be out the door.

"I'll go pick him up," I said and grabbed my keys.

If Dad wasn't in the workshop, it was a good bet he was somewhere on the three-mile route he used to jog after his doctor told him he was going to have a heart attack if he didn't stop smoking and lose some weight. When his knees refused to run anymore, he and Mom walked it together. The route was hard-wired into his brain and for some reason it was set on repeat while other things were on delete. Sometimes he'd announce that he was going and after about five minutes Mom would go pick him up. More often than not, however, he'd leave without a word.

I drove up around the hill behind the house. Boxy, white-washed mansions loomed from the inclines; absurdly massive homes only accessible via twisting veins of asphalt so narrow they should all be one-way streets but aren't. No sign of him. He couldn't have been gone that long. I remembered him going down to the TV room with Liam and Adam to hook up the PlayStation. But I didn't remember seeing him after Colleen left for the cranberry sauce.

I got to the top of the hill, then slowed on the steep decline. The turns were sharp. I didn't want to run over my own father. After each corner I expected him, and each time when he wasn't there the pit of my stomach dropped another level, an elevator plummeting to a new bottom. Still, no Dad. When I turned the last corner by the house, I couldn't believe I hadn't found him. I

almost drove around again as if somehow I might have missed him. But then I realized he must have beaten me, so I parked.

I burst into the kitchen. “Is he home?”

Mom shook her head. Logan apparently enlisted as her new helper stood by in a flowery apron. They seemed too calm for what was happening.

“I went the whole way around. He wasn’t there,” I said uncertain if my mother understood the ramifications of me returning alone. Dad was lost. I was freaking out. But she wasn’t. It didn’t make sense. She didn’t say anything. Instead she tasted a forkful of mashed potatoes.

“Mom!” I prodded. “Dad is lost.”

She went to the fridge and began hunting for something, as if she hadn’t heard me, wasn’t listening. But when she came out with some cream, I noticed her hands were trembling ever so slightly. She was holding something in, a litany pushing against the stays of her resolve, about to burst out.

“Sometimes he goes down Ventura,” she said.

“What? What do you mean? Why didn’t you say anything?”

She shot me a look that I had no trouble reading. I headed back to the car, more concerned than ever. My dad was wandering alone in Los Angeles, even if it was just the Valley. What if he got hurt? What if he got mugged? What if he wasn’t on Ventura like Mom thought but was who knows where?

We’d have to call the police. Start having neighbors and friends out looking for him. Guiltily I thought, “I don’t have time for this.” I wanted to have turkey and pumpkin pie and be

on my way. I wanted to pretend my mother hadn't just asked me to kill my father. It was not okay for any of this to be happening. I had to take a nap before work. You don't call in sick at a hospital on Christmas, not unless you want the other nurses to kill you.

I got to Ventura Boulevard and realized I didn't know which way to go. Left or right? Mom had said he goes down Ventura. Did that mean toward North Hollywood or Calabasas? I took a guess and went right. Maybe he was walking to his old hardware store. As I drove the empty streets, I glanced down each side road, my heart sinking. One turn and he'd disappear, impossible to find.

When I got to the top of Chalk Hill, I could see down the boulevard all the way to Winnetka. No Dad. I kept going. Finally, after the bend, I saw a lone figure in the distance. Relief washed over me. Even from afar I recognized him. Stocky build. Strident gait. White tennis shoes. Socks half-way up his calves. He was right there. The relief grew as I got closer. I was going pick my father up and take him home. Everything would be okay, if only for a moment. I pulled up alongside him and rolled down the window.

"Howdy, stranger," I said trying to sound jovial, repeating something he used to say after we'd all moved out and he and Mom complained we didn't visit enough. But as the words came out of my mouth, I was horrified. What if this was the moment that my Dad didn't recognize me? What if today was the day that I became a stranger to him? Every person's last moment was coming. Each of us was being erased, vanishing neuron by neuron. One day he wouldn't know any of us. And that moment, when it came, would happen without fanfare, without a goodbye.

"Bernie?" Dad said, looking up and down the street as if checking where he was. He took off his beige baseball cap and wiped his near-bald head. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Want a ride?" I made the invitation as casual as I could, as if it didn't matter to me one way or the other what he did. Dementia had given him an obstinate streak, like a two-year-old practicing "no" at every opportunity. He tapped his walking stick on the ground and checked up and down the street again.

"Sure," he said. "I'm going home."

I unlocked the door and he climbed in. I resisted the temptation to tell him he was heading away from the house. It served no purpose. He had no idea where he was going or why. I could say anything and in a minute or two it would be gone.

I took the long way home, up Wells Drive through the back streets of Tarzana and Woodland Hills. Every corner another memory: friends' houses, bike rides, hikes. He'd spent more than fifty years in *these* streets with *these* trees in *these* hills. Was it all nondescript to him now? Any street. Any tree. Any hill.

I pointed as we turned the corner. "Serrania Ridge," I said.

He looked and nodded.

"The last piggyback?" I added, hating myself for the hopeful questioning in my voice. But I couldn't help it. He always told that story here. You couldn't stop him. We'd give a collective groan and I'd shrink in my seat, embarrassed, wishing for once he'd forget, not knowing there'd be a time where I'd give anything to hear it.

Dad never let us buy him gifts for Father's Day. Instead we trudged through the hills together *enjoying* an annual hike, though I think he was probably the only one who got any pleasure out of it. Red Rock, Laskey Mesa, Caballero. I was about nine when hiked Serrania Ridge.

It was hot. Hotter than usual. We'd gotten a late start because of me, the baby, and a missing hiking boot. Colleen, Adam, and Dad forged ahead. I lagged, complaining about the heat, the dust, my feet. I was miserable. Finally, I dropped to the ground and refused to go further. I don't know what I expected but I had every intention of not budging until someone miraculously ended my suffering.

Colleen rolled her eyes and leaned against a tree.

Adam jeered. "Stop being such a doofus."

Dad came back down the trail to witness my protest. He smiled, smirked actually, like he was holding back a laugh, knew things I didn't. He offered a hand. "Want a ride, Bumblebee?"

I nodded and he hoisted me up on his back. My solace quickly transformed into regret, as my arms and legs awkward grappling for resting places. I was too big. I didn't fit anymore. It was obvious the instant he got me up that this would be the last piggyback ride my father would ever give me. Neither of us had to say it. We both knew.

I lay my head against his back. His scent, mixed with dirt and sweat, wafted from his shirt, offering a strange primal comfort. He carried me as long as he could and we grieved these last few moments in silence. Then, he put me down. He kissed my forehead and took my hand, giving it a little squeeze.

From the passenger seat, Dad jolted me out of my reminiscing. "Where are we going?" he asked.

I smiled to mask my anguish, amazed that he never seemed to notice the sorrow flowing just under the surface of everyone who loved him.

"We're going home," I said.

"Where's Helen?"

"She's at home."

He nodded and I wondered how long his mind would let him hold onto the brief salvation of knowing where he was going, and that Mom was waiting for him. I'm not being flippant when I say I'd rather get hit by a mack truck than go out like my dad. I work in a trauma/neuroscience ICU. I know exactly what mack truck meets human being looks like. I'll take that over dementia any day. I want to go out in an instant. I don't want to disappear in little pieces, like God is crushing stars between his fingers until the whole sky is dark.

Three - December 25th, 12:30pm

Colleen was back and making her kids clean up the living room when I returned with Dad. I took him downstairs to the TV room. Adam and Liam were racing cars on the PlayStation, looking like antiquated versions of their teenage selves. My brother was balder and heavier, but his khakis and white polo mirrored his old school uniform. Liam was still tall and thin, dressed in a plaid shirt I honestly think he had in the 90s. They were as self-absorbed as they had been as teenagers, too, oblivious to the fact that I'd been frantically searching for Dad while they gallivanted worlds of make-believe.

Jax was on the sofa. He'd tidied up a bit since I'd checked on him, gathering his long, brown hair into a messy ponytail with a lacy, blue scrunchy that must have belonged to Laura. Dad stopped in front of him, bafflement clouding his eyes. Jax looked nothing like Colleen's

boys, who all favored their red-headed, freckled father and whom Dad intermittently recognized, not as individuals, but as eight interchangeable grandsons all named Lincoln like Colleen's first so many years ago.

"Who are you?" Dad said, pointing at Jax. It was a question and an accusation, like it was Jax's fault that Dad didn't know who he was. Dad's body was rigid, his finger hovering two inches from Jax's nose.

I held my breath. Jax had always been kind to my dad but they were both smoldering cherry bombs ready to pop. Just three weeks ago, when someone else had put a finger in Jax's face, he'd snapped it plus two more for good measure. A classmate had called him an "ecofag", whatever that is, and "got all up" in his face. My son pinned the boy down, a knee to his chest, and methodically cracked bones.

"Hey, Grandpa," Jax said, reaching up and taking Dad's other hand. Dad relaxed, seemingly relieved to have been given a hint as to their relationship. He sat, their clasped hands resting in the space between them on the sofa. I relaxed as well. I walked over to the two them, patted Jax's shoulder and kissed my dad's head, then moved to go upstairs.

Moments like these give me hope for my son. Jax was only eight when they gave the dismantling of my father's mind the name vascular dementia. The two of them had just found in the other a kindred spirit and were working on a house for the farm dog Jax considered his own. Like my father and Shayne, Jax could lose himself in the construction of something concrete, puzzling over dimensions, angles, stabilizations. As my father faltered, Jax exhibited a tenderhearted mercy that overwhelmed me. They traded places. Jax took the lead and guided my dad through the last project he'd ever successfully complete.

If I counted, there were probably more of these kinds of moments than the other. But the bad moments seemed heavier. They had a greater hold on me. Instead of balancing with the good, they undid them. One second, Jax was a compassionate grandchild. The next, a delinquent begging for a new diagnosis.

From the bottom of the stairs, I heard Colleen, in her lilting, super-mommy voice say, "Looks pretty good, gang. Why don't we go see if Daddy and Uncle Adam are ready to give up the PlayStation." A few seconds later a stampede of red heads of varying heights charged past: Logan, Leland, Lance, and Lucas. My sister married an Irish Catholic named Liam Lannon and apparently thought alliteration was a requirement.

I did a double-take when Laura, my sister's only girl, came down behind her brothers, as always startled by how much she looked like Colleen at fifteen. The same long, straight, black hair and powdery, pale complexion, the eerie past wandering the halls of our present. She held up the book *Sophie's World*, my Christmas present to her.

"I like it," she said.

"I loved it when I was your age," I said just as my sister reached the bottom of the stairs. She stopped next to Laura. The lines by her eyes made it clear who was mother and who was daughter, but my sister was still beautiful. She got all the good genes. I got the ragged ones, the mousy, not quite auburn coloring, the indistinct freckles, frizz instead of curls.

"Loved what?" Colleen said. "Getting high?"

"We were talking about the novel," I said, ignoring my sister's taunt. I started up the stairs. "I'm going to help Mom with dinner."

"I'll be up in a minute," Colleen said.

"No rush," I said. It would be a lot easier to get to the bottom of what was happening with my dad without my sister in the room. "Get the boys settled. They might need to remind Adam and Liam how taking turns works."

When I got to the kitchen, Mom was clearing off one of the counters, getting it ready for the completed dishes which would be set out for self-service. Her attachment to tradition allowed for this single convenience. I started at the opposite end of the counter.

"Okay, Mom. Everyone's downstairs in the TV room. Tell me what's going on."

"I already told you."

"No, you said he's wandering off in the night, and he grabbed the steering wheel. I want to talk about the going peacefully part."

"You help people die all the time," she said.

"Not exactly. People die at the hospital because they're brain dead and we're keeping them alive with machines. Or because they're so injured they aren't going to survive. We give them medication to make them comfortable. We don't kill them."

"But that's what he wanted. He didn't want to be like this. It isn't him."

"I know but that doesn't mean I can help him die."

"What about that girl in Oregon with the brain tumor?" she said.

"Brittany Maynard?" I asked. Mom was a dedicated reader of *People* magazine. Colleen and I had had a heated debate about assisted suicide when Brittany's story was covered. "It's not the same. You can't euthanize a person with dementia, even in Oregon and Washington, even in Europe. They have to be able to do it themselves. Dad could have put it in writing that he didn't want to live like this and had a million witnesses, but it wouldn't matter. It would be… illegal." I

didn't say the word that actually came to mind, which was murder.

Her face changed, a tiny piece of heartache creeping into her eyes. I felt terrible. This had apparently been her failsafe. She'd been holding on, waiting for the moment when it was finally too much, then she thought we'd be able to help him go. Maybe she thought we'd all move to Oregon and there we could end their mutual suffering. It had probably taken everything she had to admit to me that she'd reached her limit.

"I know what you're going to say but maybe it's time for a nursing home," I said.

"No," she said. "I promised."

"I know but…"

"A promise is a promise. Just like 'till death do us part.'"

"I don't know what else to do," I said.

She was trapped. She'd tell you this is what she signed on for—for better or for worse, in sickness and in health—but it sucked. The three of us did what we could to help but it was never enough. We had our own lives, our own problems.

Adam lived in Washington, where he had a stereotypically nasty ex, and kids he had to fight to see. Every couple of years he dropped in for the holidays. The best he could probably do was send cash once in a while. Colleen and I watched Dad here and there so Mom could have a break: take an uninterrupted shower, go to lunch with a friend, get her hair done. It wasn't easy. We were always juggling.

Colleen homeschooled her herd and miraculously fed and clothed them all on Liam's L.A. Unified teaching salary. I worked nightshift. Jax had just gotten expelled from the last school that would have anything to do with him, and his dad Shayne and I were being sued by

the parents of the kid with the broken fingers. And hanging out with Dad for a few hours was nothing compared to living with him. It was like babysitting someone else's kids and thinking you know what it's like to raise some.

I heard someone coming up from downstairs and turned just as Colleen came through the door. I glanced at our mother. Was this conversation over and, more importantly, was it just for me? Had I finally—because of my unique place in the world—uncovered a situation where my mother selected me over my sister? Or was she going to talk to Colleen about it too? I wasn't sure which I wanted.

Colleen had become a Roman Catholic to marry Liam. It was a formality and total BS because she was pregnant at the time. But over the years she'd become passionate in fundamentalistic way. We frequently argued about abortion, death with dignity, capital punishment but always in the abstract. Not about people we knew. Not about our family. It was almost like a sport and I was never convinced of her devotion. She just had a natural attraction to righteousness.

Mom's face changed. She forced a smile and asked brightly, "Do the children like the game?"

I was relieved. I didn't want to have this conversation with my sister. I didn't *want* to have it with anyone, but in a stupid way it made me feel closer to my mom, childishly glad that she'd picked me instead of Colleen. Forty-seven years old and I was still looking for my mother to put me in front of my sister, to crown me the good daughter.

"Liam and Adam are still at it. I don't know if the kids will ever get a chance," Colleen said, then walked toward me. I raised my hands like I was being arrested. She frowned. She was

always fixing something on me, picking a piece of lint from my sweater, tidying me up like I was one of her kids. She lifted the charm on my necklace, the bumblebee I'd worn since my dad gave it to me for my thirteenth birthday.

"Make a wish," she said as she repositioned the clasp to the back of my neck.

The tips of her fingers brushed my skin, raising goosebumps. She looked at me. Her nose wrinkled as if the words my mother and I had shared had a particular scent that was lingering in the air. I think she sensed something was going on. I felt like a traitor.

The Promise 1977

The funeral was over. Time to go. I didn't know what we were waiting for. Why wasn't Dad saying, "Let's get this show on the road" like he usually did when people lollygagged. The sun blazed so bright and hot I was certain the thing dripping down my back was a melted layer of skin. Funerals were supposed to be gloomy affairs, dark skies with clouds and rain. Yet there was nothing but blue above, any fragments of cloud chased off by the hot, Santa Ana winds.

The service had been short. My family—my mother, father, us three kids and our two uncles—were the only ones there, filling a single pew on one side of the church. After, we'd walked to the gravesite and stood exposed in the intense sunlight for something just a few seconds less than forever. The priest spoke more, then four men lowered Grandma Rogers' coffin into the ground.

But we were still waiting, standing in the sun as the adults wiped their eyes, hugged each

other, and shook the priest's hand again and again. I no longer felt guilty for wanting to go home. All I could think about was getting out of my clammy, stiff dress and lying on the floor in our living room, salvaging whatever remained of Saturday. Maybe there'd still be time to catch a couple of cartoons or the afternoon matinee, like *Benji* or *Escape to Witch Mountain*.

Finally, after hugging my uncles one more time, Dad headed toward the car. I wanted to sprint, run so I would get the backwards facing single seat in our Volkswagen camper. Then, I wouldn't have to sit with either my eleven-year-old brother or nine-year old sister, their sweaty skin near mine. But it was too hot, and I'd already gotten scolded once for not behaving appropriately at a cemetery. When we got to the car, my brother reached for the sliding door. My father blocked his arm.

"Wait," Dad said.

We stood, huddled around him, not sure what was going on.

"Over there," he said, pointing to the side of the car. "Line up."

My mother remained next to him and I suspected the three of us were about to get reprimanded for too much fidgeting or whispering during the service. Why couldn't they wait until we were at the house? If we were lucky, one of them would turn on the air-conditioning, then none of us would care about getting yelled at.

"You too," my father said, gesturing for our mother to join us in the lineup. Dad paced in front of us, shoulders tense. Something was wrong. Dad was the gentle one, the soft-touch who could always be talked into a bag of M&Ms at the hardware store. Mom was the enforcer, the one who threw looks that hurt worse than her wooden spoon on your bottom.

But Dad had been acting different ever since the call from the nursing home informed us

that Grandma Rogers, his mother, had died. He'd snap at us for minor infractions that normally only Mom policed, then sometimes without warning he'd pull us into hugs that lasted so long you had to squirm to get out of them.

Pa Rogers had dropped dead of a heart attack, when my dad was ten. My father and his two young brothers were raised by Grandma Rogers, a single mom in the 1950's. A saint in our household. But to me, a frail, old woman who didn't speak or make eye contact. A lap I was forced to sit on, a face I was obliged to kiss even though I didn't want to. The only good thing about the nursing home was the parrot in the lobby whom I often sat with, listening to him repeat, "I love you," and, "Coco is a pretty boy," in the accent of the secretary at the front desk.

Dad stopped pacing and stood in front of Adam, his finger wagging at Adam's chest.

"This is important," Dad said.

Adam nodded and I wondered if he knew what was happening because I sure didn't. I was utterly confused and felt like I was going faint or vomit.

"Promise you'll *never* put me in a nursing home," my father said.

Adam nodded again, his long, sun-bleached bangs bouncing in his eyes.

"No," my father said. "Say it."

Adam hesitated. "Dad?"

Dad's voice grew insistent. "Promise!"

"I promise."

"You promise what?"

"I promise I'll never put you in a nursing home," Adam said, his voice trembling so much it sounded like he was going to cry.

Dad moved to Colleen. I guessed she was as eager to get home as me because she looked him square in the eyes and without hesitation said, “I’ll never put you in a nursing home. I promise.”

I was next. The itchy lace collar on my dress scratched my neck. I wanted to rip it off. My mother took my hand and squeezed, as if it were a secret signal that I should understand but didn’t.

My father towered in front me. I almost laughed. I was tiny. How would I ever be in a position to put him in a nursing home. How could someone as strong and powerful as my father ever be reduced to the state of our grandmother. The promise fell out of my mouth easily, thoughtlessly. “I promise I’ll never put you in a nursing home.”

I was only six. The irony was lost on me. Dad put Grandma in a home because he couldn’t care for her yet we were promising not to do the same. Maybe he thought it was a covenant, somehow protective. If we all said it and there was nowhere for him to go, then he couldn’t get Alzheimer’s like Grandma Rogers. Or maybe he hated himself for not being able to care for her and was trying to save us from some tortured regret.

He moved to my mother, who dropped my hand.

“Bill, please,” she said quietly. “Please.”

“Helen, I mean it,” he said, not angry but earnest, pleading. “Never.”

My mother smiled, the pained smile of someone who has succumbed. “I will never put you in a nursing home, my darling. Never.”

We piled into the un-airconditioned car and rode home silently, balmy air blowing through the open windows. I stared at the green trees, still feeling sick to my stomach.