

CLARA

They say that death comes in threes. First it was the man who lives across the street from my father and mother. Mr. Baumgartner, dead from prostate cancer at the age of seventy-four. And then it was a former high school classmate of mine, only twenty-eight years old, a wife and mother, dead from a pulmonary embolism—a blood clot that shot straight to her lungs.

And then it was Nick.

I'm sitting on the sofa as the phone beside me starts to ring. Nick's name appears on the display screen, his familiar voice on the other end of the line like any of the other thousands of times he's called. But this time it's different because this is the last time he will ever call.

"Hey," says Nick.

"Hey yourself."

"How's everything going?" he asks.

"Just fine," I tell him.

"Is Felix asleep?"

"Yup," I say. The way new babies have a tendency to do, up all night, sleep all day. He lies in my arms, rendering me immobile. I can't do a single thing but watch him sleep. Felix is four

days and three hours old. In seventeen more minutes he will be four days and four hours old. The labor was long and intense as they nearly all are. There was pain despite the epidural, three hours of pushing despite the fact that delivery was supposed to get easier with each subsequent birth. With Maisie it was quick and easy by comparison; with Felix it was hard.

“Maybe you should wake him,” Nick suggests.

“And how should I do that?”

My words aren’t cross. They’re tired. Nick knows this. He knows that I am tired.

“I don’t know,” he says, and I all but hear the shrug through the telephone, see Nick’s own tired but boyish smile on the other end of the line, the usually clean-shaven face that begins to accrue with traces of brown bristle at this time of day, along the mustache line and chin. His words are muffled. The phone has slipped from his mouth, as I hear him whisper to Maisie in an aside, *Let’s go potty before we leave*, and I imagine his capable hands swapping a pair of pale pink ballet slippers with the hot-pink Crocs. I see Maisie’s feet squirm in his hands, drawing away. Maisie wants to join the troop of other four-years-olds practicing their clumsy leg extensions and toe touches.

But, Daddy, her tiny voice whines. *I don’t have to go potty.*

And Nick’s firm but gentle command: *You need to try.*

Nick is the better parent. I tend to give in, to say *okay*, only to regret it when, three miles into our commute home, Maisie suddenly gropes for her lap and screams that she has to go with a shame in her eyes that tells me she’s already gone.

Maisie’s voice disappears into the little girls’ room, and Nick returns to the phone. “Should I pick something up for dinner?” he asks, and I stare down at Felix, sound asleep on my still-distended lap. My chest leaks through a white cotton blouse. I sit on an ice pack to soothe the pain of childbirth. An episiotomy was needed, and so there are stitches; there is blood. I haven’t bathed today and the amount of sleep I’ve reaped in the last four

days can be counted on a single hand. My eyelids grow heavy, threatening to close.

Nick's voice comes at me again through the phone. "Clara," he says, this time deciding for me, "I'll pick up something for dinner. Maisie and I will be home soon. And then you can rest," he says, and our evening routine will go a little something like this: I will sleep, and Nick will wake me when it's time for Felix to eat. And then come midnight, Nick will sleep and I will spend the rest of the night awake with a roused Felix again in my arms.

"Chinese or Mexican?" he asks, and I say Chinese.

These are the last words I ever exchange with my husband.

I wait with Felix for what feels like forever, staring at the filmy black of the lifeless TV, the remote on the other side of the room, hiding beneath a paisley pillow on the leather settee. I can't risk waking Felix to retrieve it. I don't want to wake Felix. My eyes veer from TV to remote and back again, as if able to turn that TV on through mental telepathy, to eschew that all-consuming boredom and repetition that accompanies infant care—eat, sleep, poop, repeat—with a few minutes of *Wheel of Fortune* or the evening news.

When will Nick be home?

Harriet, our red merle border collie, lies curled into a ball at my feet, blending well into the jute rug: part of the furnishings, and also our guard. She hears the car before I do. One of her ticked ears stands on end, and she rises to her feet. I wait in vain for the sound of the garage door opening, for Maisie to come stampeding in through the steel door, pivoting like a little ballerina across the wooden floors of our home. My stomach growls at Nick's arrival and the promise of food. I'm hungry.

But instead the noise comes from the front door, a business-like rapping against the wood, and Harriet knows before me that it's not Nick.

I rise from the sofa and open the door.

A man stands before me, his words evasive and out of reach. They float in the space between us like lightning bugs, flying swiftly away as I try to gather them in my hands. "Are you Mrs. Solberg?" he asks, and when I say that I am, he says, "There's been an accident, ma'am."

He wears a black woven shirt, a pair of black woven pants. On his shirt there are patches, a badge. The car parked in my drive reads *Serve & Protect*.

"Ma'am?" asks the man when I don't reply. Felix lies in my arms like a sack of potatoes. His body slumps, inert, still sleeping and growing heavier with time. Harriet sits at my feet, glaring at this strange man.

Though my ears hear the words, my brain can't process them. Sleep deprivation I blame, or maybe it's denial. I stare at the man before me and wonder: What does he want with me? What is he trying to sell?

"Can it wait?" I ask, pressing Felix to my chest so he can't see the moist patches of milk that stain my shirt. My insides feel heavy; the lining of my legs burns. I limp, an effect of giving birth. "My husband will be home soon," I say, promising, "any second now," and I see the fabricated pity that settles upon the man's desensitized face. He's done this before, many times. I tell him about Maisie's ballet class, how Nick is driving home as we speak, how he will be here any minute. I tell him how he was stopping only to pick up dinner, and then he will be home. I don't know why I say so much. I open the door wider. I invite him inside.

"Would you like to wait inside?" I say, and I tell him again how Nick will be home soon.

Outside it is nearly eighty-five degrees. It's the twenty-fifth of June.

There's a hand on my elbow; his hat is in his hands. He steps inside my home, sure to cling to me so that he can brace Felix's soft spot should I fall.

"There's been an accident, ma'am," he says again.

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The Chinese food we usually eat comes from a small take-out restaurant in the town next to ours. Nick has a thing for their pot stickers, me for the egg drop soup. The restaurant isn't more than five miles away, but between here and there lies a rural road which Nick likes to take because he prefers to avoid the heavy traffic of the highway, especially during rush hour. Harvey Road is a flat, level plane; there are no hills. It's narrow, two lanes that hardly seem suitable for two cars, especially along the bend, a sharp ninety-degree angle that resembles an L, the double yellow line that dissects it met with disregard as cars drift blindly across it to make the hairpin turn. A chain of horse properties run the length of Harvey Road: large, modern houses surrounded by picket fences, harboring thoroughbreds and American quarter horses. It's the high-end version of rural, tucked in a nook between two thriving suburbs that snowball with droves of department stores, convenience stores, gas stations and dentists.

The day is sunny, the kind of glorious day that gives way to a magnificent sunset, turning the world to gold at the hands of King Midas. The sun hovers in the belly of the sky like a Chinese lantern, golden and bright, glaring into the eyes of commuters. It sidles its way into cars' rearview mirrors, reminding us of its dominion in this world as it blinds drivers moving into and away from its glare. But the sun is only one cause of the accident. There's also the sharp turn and Nick's rapid speed I'm soon to learn, three things that don't mix well, like bleach and vinegar.

That's what he tells me, the man in the woven shirt and pants, who stands before me, bracing me by the elbow, waiting for me to fall. I see the sunlight slope through the open front door and gain entry into my home, airbrushing the staircase, the distressed hickory floors, the hairs on Felix's vulnerable head in a golden hue.

There are words and phrases equally as elusive as *accident* had been: *too fast* and *collide* and *tree*. “Was anyone hurt?” I ask, knowing Nick has a tendency of driving too fast, and I see him in my mind’s eye force some other car off the road and headlong into a tree.

There’s the hand again at my elbow, a sturdy hand that keeps me upright. “Ma’am,” he says again. “Mrs. Solberg.” He tells me that there was no one there. No witnesses to the scene, Nick taking that turn at over fifty miles per hour, the car being propelled into the air by the sheer physics of it, speed and velocity and Newton’s first law of motion that an object in motion stays in motion until it collides with a white oak tree.

I tell myself this: if I had asked for Mexican for dinner, Nick would be home by now.

The fluorescent lights line the ceiling like a row of stalled cars at a stoplight, one in front of the other in front of the other. The light reflects off the corridor’s linoleum floors, coming at me from both directions as everything in that one, single moment comes at me from both directions: Felix with a sudden, single-minded need to eat; men and women in hospital scrubs; gurneys ferrying by; a hand on my arm; a solicitous smile; a glass of ice water set in my shaking hand; a cold, hard chair; *Maisie*.

Felix disappears from my arms and for one split second, I feel lost. Now my father is there, standing before me, and in his arms sits Felix as I fold myself into him, and my father holds me, too. He is thin but sturdy, my father. His hair is nothing more than a few, faint traces of gray on an otherwise smooth scalp, the skin darkened with age spots. “Oh, Daddy,” I say, and it’s only there, in my father’s arms, that I let the truth settle in, the fact that my husband, Nick, lies lifeless on an operating table, brain dead but being kept alive on life support while a list of organ recipients is procured: Who will take my husband’s eyes, his kidneys, his skin? A ventilator now breathes for him because Nick’s brain

no longer has the ability to tell his lungs to breathe. There is no activity in the brain, and there is an absence of blood flow. This is what the doctor tells me as he stands before me, my father behind me like a pair of bookends holding me upright.

“I don’t understand,” I tell the physician more because I refuse to believe it than I don’t understand, and he leads me to a chair and suggests that I sit. It’s there, as I stare into his brown, disciplined eyes that he explains again.

“Your husband has suffered from a traumatic brain injury. This caused swelling and bleeding in the brain,” he says, knotting his arms before his thin frame. “A brain hemorrhage. The blood has spread over the surface of the brain,” and it’s sometime there that he loses me, for all I can picture is an ocean of red blood spilling on to a sandy beach, staining the sand a fuchsia pink. I can no longer follow his words, though he tries hard to explain it to me, to choose smaller and more rudimentary words as the expression on my face becomes muddled and confused. A woman stops by, asking me to sign a donor authorization form, explaining to me what it is that I’m signing as I scrawl my name sloppily on a line.

I’m allowed into the trauma center to watch as a second physician, a woman this time, performs the very same tests as the male doctor has just done, examining Nick’s pupils for dilation, checking his reflexes. Nick’s head is shifted to the left and the right, while the physician watches the movement of his steel-blue eyes. The doctor’s eyes are stern, her expression growing grim. The CT scan is reviewed again and again, and I hear these words slip into the room: *brain shift* and *intracranial hemorrhaging*, and I wish that they would put a Band-Aid on it so that we could all go home. I will Nick’s eyes, his throat, to do whatever it is they need for them to do. I beg for Nick to cough, for his eyes to dilate, for him to sit up on the gurney and speak. *Chinese or Mexican?* he’d say and this time I would say Mexican.

I will never eat Chinese food again.

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I say my goodbyes. I stand before Nick's still-alive but already-dead body and say goodbye. But I don't say anything. I lay my hand on a hand which once held mine, which only days ago stroked my damp hair as I pushed an infant from my body. A hand which only hours ago cradled Maisie's tiny one in his as they skipped through the door—she in a pale pink leotard and tutu, he in the very same clothing that is now sprinkled with blood, clipped from his body like store coupons at some nurse's hurried hand—to ballet class, while I stayed behind with Felix in my arms. I run a convulsing hand along his hair. I touch the bristle of his face. I lick my thumb and wipe at a swatch of fluid above his eye. I press my lips to his forehead and cry.

This is not the way I want to remember him, here on this aseptic bed with tubing stuck into his arms and throat and nose; pieces of tape plastered to his face; the machines' grating beeps and bleeps, reminding me that if it weren't for them, Nick would already be dead. The appearance of his face has changed, and suddenly I realize that this is not my Nick. A terrible mistake has been made. My heart leaps. This man's face is covered with contusions, and is swollen so that it's no longer recognizable, not to me, not to his hapless wife, another woman who will soon be informed her husband is dead. They've brought some other man into this room—mistaking him for Nick—and his wife, this poor man's wife, is now wandering the monochrome hospital halls wondering where he is. Perhaps he, too, is a Nick, but *my* Nick is somewhere else with Maisie. I stare at this torpid body before me, at the blood-stained hair, the pale, ductile skin, at the clothing—Nick's clothing, I thought only moments ago, but now I see it's an insipid blue polo shirt that any man could wear—that's been pruned from his body. This is not my Nick; I know this now. I swivel quickly and scurry through the curtain partition to find someone, *anyone*, so I can proclaim my discovery: the dying man on that hospital bed is not my husband. I

stare a completely bemused nurse right in the eye and demand to know what they've done with my husband.

"Where is he? Where is he?" I beg, latching on to her arm and joggling it up and down.

But of course it is Nick. Nick is the man on that hospital bed. My Nick, and now everyone in the whole entire hospital is looking at me with pity, feeling thankful that they're not me.

When I'm done they lead me to another room, where Maisie sits on a hospital table beside my father, fervently filling him in on the fundamentals of her ballet teacher, Miss Becca: she's pretty, she's nice. The hospital staff has told me she is fine, and yet there's a great wave of relief that washes over me at seeing Maisie with my own eyes. My legs buckle at the knee, and I latch on to the doorframe, telling myself it's true. She really is fine. I'm feeling dizzy, the room orbiting around me as if I am the sun and it is the earth. Felix is there in my father's grip, and in Maisie's hand is a lollipop, cherry-red, her favorite, which dyes her tongue and lips bright red. There is a bandage on her hand—*just a small laceration*, I'm assured—and on her face is a smile. Big. Bright. Naïve. She does not know that her father is dead. That he is dying as we speak.

Maisie turns to me, still bubbly from an afternoon at ballet. "Look, Mommy," she says, "Boppy's here," which is her nickname for my dad, and has been since she was two years old and couldn't enunciate her *r*'s or her *g*'s. She sets a sticky, lollipop-coated hand on his, one which is three times the size of hers. She's completely indifferent to the tears that plummet from my eyes. Her thin legs dangle from the edge of the examining table, one of her shoes lost in the maelstrom of the crash. The knee of her tights is torn. But Maisie doesn't mind. One of her pigtails has gone missing, too, half of her corkscrew curls trailing her shoulders and back while the rest is held secure.

"Where's Daddy?" she says, squinting her eyes past me to see if Nick is there. I don't have it in me to tell her what's happened

to Nick. I envision her sweet, innocent childhood thwarted with three words: *Daddy is dead*. She stares out the door frame, waiting for Nick to appear, and I see her pat her tiny stomach and tell me she's hungry. So hungry she could eat a pig, she says. *A horse*, I nearly correct her for the erroneous cliché, but then realize it doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore now that Nick is dead. Maisie's eyes are hopeful, her smile wide.

Until they aren't.

A Code Blue is announced over the loud speaker system, and at once the hallway is a flurry of activity. Doctors and nurses go running by, a crash cart getting shuttled down the linoleum floors. It's loud, the wheels thunderous against the floor, the items in the cart rattling in their metal drawers. At once, Maisie cries out in fright, bounding from the table and dropping to her knees, gathering herself into a ball on the floor. "He's here," she whines, and as I, too, fall to my knees and gather her into my arms, I find her shaking. My father and my eyes meet.

"He followed us here," Maisie cries, but I tell her no, that Daddy isn't here, and as I fold Maisie into my arms and stroke her bedraggled hair, I can't help but wonder what Maisie means, *He followed us*, and why, in a matter of seconds, she's gone from being hopeful of seeing Nick to scared.

"What is it, Maisie?" I ask. "What's wrong?"

But she only shakes her head and closes her eyes tight. She won't tell me.