Me in my dad's arms, March 1990.

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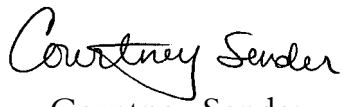
EVEN ANGELS ARE ASTONISHED



Courtney Sender

1

Ari Goldstein is not dead yet.

No matter how he reassures his daughter of this, his continued existence, Lydia refuses assurance. She brings him boy after boy. "In case you die before I marry," she says, leaning against the dark window of the passenger seat. "I want you to have met my future husband."

"What about your mother?" says Ari, and Lydia shrugs, writing him off first—Ari, sixty-five and years from retirement, gray-haired but a full head of it, gym membership-less but still mowing the lawn every summer and shoveling the snow every winter. Still lifting her suitcases from the overhead bins when he picks her up from Westwood Station in the middle of town. Still picking her up from Westwood Station in the middle of town, every time, though she shows up at his New Jersey doorstep from Boston as often as a neighbor.

"I am not dying," he says.

"I just couldn't marry a man who hasn't seen my father."

Ari hears in this what even Lydia lacks the mawkishness to speak aloud: You are elemental to me, Dad. Yet again, he wishes that he'd heeded Anna's warning not to tell their daughter about his detached retina last year. Though his eye was swiftly repaired, the news had left Lydia in even more than her usual tears. And this is saying something:

post-Sam Lydia has been known, over their rare family dinners, to set down her fork and break suddenly into tears, because she loves Ari and her mother and her younger brother Devon so much that the scooping of spaghetti and scalding of tongue on sauce is too sharp with sweetness to endure dry eyed.

"So take a picture," Ari says, turning halfway toward her at a stoplight; he lost his left earlobe to a ceiling fan as a boy and doesn't like it photographed.

But Lydia slips her phone back into the pocket of her jeans. "I need you unadulterated," she says, simply. Ari wonders at how young his daughter remains, somehow thirty-one and still a child. His own success, in a certain way, as her protector; his failure as her teacher.

"Didn't I just meet Jose last month? The shoe guy?"

"Different Jose. This one's in tech, I think." She chews a lock of curly hair; she's tucked Jose into the cab in the rearview, claiming Ari briefly for herself. "He spilled a bag of tomatoes at the minimart last night."

"You barely know these people, Lydia!"

"You barely knew Mom when you first met her. And Jose One sold socks."

Sam. Obinze. Marcus. Adam. Shujaat. Scott. Zeke. Jose One. Jose Two.

Lydia falls asleep against the window, haloed by streetlamps on empty suburban sidewalks. His daughter wants him unadulterated. *But I am an adult!* he wants to protest. Short one earlobe, several pigments in his hair, uncountable years of memories, two children's worth of college tuition, two wives, four deceased dogs, quite a lot of muscle mass, and some patience. But never hope. Hope for the future—a third chance at love for him, a second for Lydia, a first, someday, for Devon—Ari still has that in full supply.

Jose Two is his daughter's type, if such a thing can be said of the motley assortment she brings weekly to Ari's doorstep. They all have something of Sam in them—Lydia's ex-boyfriend, out of their lives a decade by now but still, Ari suspects, encamped in Lydia's mind. Sam: forever glancing at the door, a Boston boy constantly skipping school and hopping planes with money he made in short bursts of

inhuman productivity as an SAT tutor. And Lyd, Ari's homebody daughter who'd deemed B.U. too far from home—who'd accepted only once Devon promised to choose Harvard over Princeton for his early application—had joined Sam on his trips until the fateful day she couldn't. Ari had liked Sam, understood the boy's restlessness in ways he'd never admitted to Lydia or Anna.

Lydia met Jose Two in a line. In Massachusetts, Lydia has become an expert at meeting men at checkout counters: grocery stores, concession stands, delis. She says, as if musing to herself, "In New Jersey, we call it waiting *on* line," then swipes her ringlets of brown hair from her eyes and waits for the academics around her to titter at the absurdity of a place called New Jersey. Lydia does meet men online, but the ones she meets on lines are always more astonished to find themselves here in Bergen County, New Jersey, plucked from a temperate New England Trader Joe's, given a train ticket courtesy of the grandfatherly inheritance of the girl with the unturnawayable hair and the whimsical plan, retrieved at Westwood Station by a graying man who says, "I'm Lydia's dad," as her companion thinks, for half a second, *Who is Lydia?*

Sometimes, the train ride is sufficient to convince Lydia that she will not be dating this man at this moment. Jose Two seems to have suffered this fate, used primarily as a prop over the dinner Ari cooks of baked salmon and asparagus; Lydia makes ominous reference to a V8 spilled on her lap, but she adores Ari's lemon glaze and thinks he looks well, his eye better healed than last week, asking questions to draw him out in case she someday weds this spiller of red drinks: *Tell Jose about growing up in Brooklyn, Daddy, he thinks Williamsburg's always been this hip; How'd you end up a computer engineer when you started off a cab driver?; Jose works for Google, he hates the mail, wasn't sorting at the post office your favorite job?* At night's end, Lydia heads to her bedroom as Jose glances quizzically at Ari down the hall, waiting for a fraternal wink or a paternal glare. But Ari is not the deciding factor in matters of sleep. Lydia points Jose Two to the couch and sleeps in her childhood bedroom; she barely knows the guy, and doesn't like him. Jose One had gotten Devon's old bed.

Go easy on the boys, Lyd, Ari wants to say, but he refrains. She will

find her own way. He knows all too well that a parent is only advising himself, twenty years too late. His own father used to counsel him to marry a dual citizen. Also someone thin—a woman who wouldn't need too much space in a cramped cabinet behind a false wall, should another war necessitate it. A thin woman with wide hips. This Ari ignored, marrying thick-shouldered, Midwestern, sturdy Janelle, then divorcing her for flighty Anna—wide hips, thin torso, English/Dutch, a convert. Anna the mother of his children, the love of his life, the great disaster of his middle age. Anna who left him for a life of teaching yoga in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who mailed little Lydia and littler Devon picture postcards of big Amish families posing solemnly before a horse-drawn buggy, who somehow retained the love of all three people she had left behind. Who is not, in Lydia's opinion, an imminent candidate for death.

Closed behind his bedroom door, Ari calls Anna.

"How's this one, Starry?"

He wishes he could use her nickname as easily as she uses his. There's an imbalance here, an unfair advantage. Starry is innocuous, a benign name, about his rare but luminous moments of proactive decisiveness; Gamma is laden. If there's a long game to be played with you, Anna had said the night they met, when he was married to Janelle and tossing back beers, playing couples softball, I want to play it. She'd been half of a couple too, until that morning. She'd had what he now saw as Lydia's hair and she'd tossed it with abandon, refusing to be evicted from the team because she was playing alone. She would bat for two, she'd said, and proceeded to hit both balls in a row out of the park and into the headlights of his parked car.

"Useless," says Ari. "Not a serious contender." He drops his slacks in a heap beside his bed and leaves them there. "Though at least she brings people home. When I finally meet a girlfriend of Devon's…"

"Devon's doing just fine," Anna says, an uninterpretable certitude and finality in her tone on the subject. "Lydia's the one to worry about. That Sam. I hated that Sam."

"He was okay," says Ari. Sam alone among Lydia's boyfriends had met Anna, and is the only one to whom she can compare the others.

Devon is the child who visits Lancaster; Lydia comes home to Westwood, their children splitting custody of them. "Though not Jewish."

"Who cares about Jewish? You just excuse him because he's male. You don't understand what it means, to make a choice like that."

Sam had instructed twenty-one-year-old Lydia not to tell her parents about the pregnancy, but Lyd was Lyd: she'd told; Sam had bolted. While Lydia was scooped out in Lancaster, poor mortified Sam had jumped a plane to the Bahamas.

"They made a mistake," Ari says.

"He did," says Anna. She had become, toward the end of their marriage, an abject hater of men, and Ari had been glad, when they divorced—this was the only reason he was glad—that she would be too far away to infect their daughter.

"Liddy kill you with hoping yet?" she says.

Ari pulls the comforter up to his chin. "You just wait, Anna. I'll outlive you."

Miles away, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Anna laughs like an angel. He still loves that laugh, he no longer tells himself not to or that he's stopped. He doesn't love it anew, or again. He loves it still.

"Wanna bet?" she says. They do this. They are not betting. They are adding to the bet. "Loser puts the down payment on a retirement home."

"When she's already paying for the timeshare in Hawaii?"

Anna thinks. "Loser takes the dog to get de-balled."

"There's a dog?"

Through his bedroom window, Ari watches the neighbors' teenage son pull into his driveway with a quick flash of headlights and radio blare, both suddenly cut. The light at the foot of Ari's bed vanishes. Anna says, "Of course there's a dog."

Ari hangs up with that largesse, that expansion of the room, that assures him that he and Anna are on a mending path. The long game, he should call her back and tell her.

He gives in to his impulse to check on Lydia. When his children turned twelve, rather than giving them presents, Ari told them that they'd earned their privacy, installing doorknob locks on which he

tied a ribbon into a bow, big fingers mismanaging the loops. He meant it. He never opened their doors at night again: never watched their chests rise and fall one, two, three times, closed the door silently, held the knob and uncurled it, felt assured they were asleep so he too could sleep. Instead, he stood outside their locked doors and listened until he heard a sigh, a cough, a rustle. Sometimes, hearing nothing, he would go to sleep uneasy, rapping them awake for school before their alarms, flushed with relief at the sound of their protests.

He stands now outside his daughter's door. Lydia is on the phone, crying, which doesn't concern Ari; Lydia is a crier like him, unlike her mother. There's a strength in the ability to cry, he believes, and has taught her. It's her silence that would concern him.

"I picture a wedding," she says. "I picture Daddy not there." He hears her sweep across the sheets, two bumps on the wall; he envisions Anna on the phone, instructing Lydia to lift her legs high above her chest, to rush the blood to her heart, to simulate exertion. To remind her racing pulse to slow.

Ari laughs to himself, at Anna and at Lydia, as he descends the stairs carefully to the kitchen. He once broke a toe on these stairs, carrying toddler Lydia in one arm and newborn Devon in the other, tripping on a toy car and refusing the impulse to brace himself. He looks at the postcards of the Amish stuck to his fridge. Their set jaws. Ari has always thought they look familiar, like Jews: like his father's sepia photograph of his family, born in unpronounceable villages in Czechoslovakia, died in Auschwitz, Terezin, Treblinka. These Amish look the old-world way his family would live and look if they reappeared today, transported through the shower gases.

One hand about to pull open the fridge, to ready turkey sandwiches and lunchbox juice for Lydia and Jose Two's train ride back, Ari thinks he can see a smile edging at the corners of the Amish father's eyes. A joke, the bearded patriarch seems to be thinking, all this solemnity. All these portents. A joke.

Still, Ari goes to the doctor. Lydia is not the fortune-teller of the family—Lydia is wrong, all wrong about the future, changing planes at

the last minute to avoid crashes that don't materialize, buying expensive birthday gifts for new friends who last the season. If Devon had worried that his father was going to die, Ari would check himself immediately into a hospital and not leave until the doctors had found the secret blood clot making its silent way up his throat into his brain.

He has a loose patella—a kneecap, that's all, one loose kneecap—and some hearing loss in his shortened left ear, but otherwise, a clean bill of health. Even the vision that turned last year to starry black fireworks now 20/20. "Looking at your tests," says Dr. Orani, "you're forty."

Forty! When he was forty, he and Anna were still together in New Jersey. They had just buried Putz, their second dog, a caramel spaniel-something cross. They were attending back-to-school nights, learning that Lydia, who folded her outgrown dresses into Devon's dresser drawer, refused to share, that Devon, who read novels at home, had convinced his teacher he was illiterate. They were grilling the kids after Saturday morning services, learning that Lydia wouldn't split her sandwich with the girl who wanted her math homework, that Devon couldn't stomach Dick and Jane when he was devouring Dickens.

Forty. Ari and Anna were rocking each other's bodies at night, closer than sex, they were children with each other again. They didn't spoon then, with a son and daughter busily becoming people in the adjacent rooms; they cradled.

He calls Anna, to tell her that he is still as strong as the man she met on the softball field, though he does not do yoga. That he can appreciate yoga, though. That he in fact looked up a few moves on YouTube, that he even has a favorite: arms hugged across his own body, forearms lifted, then twisted, hands held. Garudasana, he will tell her. Maybe he will sign up for a class.

She does not pick up the phone.

If even Devon had told Ari that Anna was going to die first, that his ex-wife with the big childbearing hips and the lithe new yoga body would develop a headache in the gray light of a Lancaster morning that would kill her by the afternoon, sixty-two and teaching, learning, being, and betting—he would not have believed it. He would have

scoffed, said thank you for the confidence, I'll pick my plot. His game with Anna was a joke, a flirtation. He fully expected to lose the bet. He believed in an afterlife—he tried to, anyway—just so he could pay up. He had planned to pay. He had wanted to lose the bet. He had so wanted to lose.

He has an easier time breaking Devon's heart. The boy, the boy; Anna accused him yesterday of going easier on Sam, but she used to accuse him of being harder on Devon, sheltering their son less than their daughter, and maybe he had and maybe Devon has turned out better for it, tougher and more ready for the world. Ari is proud of Devon, who lives alone in Cambridge professing philosophy at Harvard and stands stoically in the cold, hatflaps over his cheeks, waiting for the T.

"Jesus Christ," says Devon, and there is wind in the phone or possibly in Ari's left ear, where the hearing really has been getting worse. The wind sounds right to Ari: staticky, unearthly, and tragic—the world in mourning. Referential mania, Devon would tell him. "I had a dream about a headache, Dad, but I thought it was yours, from having Lyd home."

Devon cries. His son the solitary philosophy professor. The cold-bearer. His lashes must be freezing over in the Cambridge chill.

The world inverts. When Ari hangs up and dials Lydia, warm in a down coat, she does not cry. "Garudasana, Dad," she says, her voice adult and unknown to him. "It's good for mourning."

If Devon had told his father that Anna was going to die first, Ari would have scoffed but then awoken in the middle of the night, the way he did when Anna first left him, blanket-cradled. Ari would have called her, then hung up at the sound of her voice—the way he did when she first left him, straining to hear her breath through the silence on the phone, one, two, three. He would have gotten into the car and driven four hours to Amish country, found her house the width of their old blue Ford Taurus in which their first dog, Festival, had died, knocked on her gingerbread door, and told her, I'm sick of playing the long game. Smiled like that Amish father in the postcard.

Called her Gamma. Unlocked the door. Listened to her breathe.

2

The girl at Sam's doorstep, teeth chattering in a windbreaker, has not appeared here in ten years.

"Lydia Goldstein," Sam says, opening the door. Whenever he's thought of her this last decade, he's gone over and over the groove of their mistaken last night together, that strange thing she did, biting his left earlobe so hard it bled. But when he finds her at his doorstep, what occurs to him is not the dull, sideways sweetness of that pain; instead, he remembers a November night in college, unremarkable, when he awoke to her cold toes at his ankle and pushed her feet into socks while she slept.

She drops to one knee in the snow on his brick front porch. "Shit," says Sam, lunging forward and grabbing her arm to pull her back up, remembering now how weak she was, how she fell to pieces at nothing, crying if he drained spaghetti or aced a test.

The apparition of Lydia Goldstein shakes off his arm. She pulls a pear-sized velvet box from the inside pocket of her jacket.

"Will you marry me?" she says.

Sam sometimes gets the impression, during his most important moments with Lydia, that some other, stronger thing inside him is calling the shots. "What's in the box?" he says.

Lydia Goldstein flips back the velvet lid. A condom.

Lydia has had four boyfriends. All of them and more have met her father, but Sam is the only one who ever met her mother, dead as of yesterday—Sam feels an unexpected stab in the region of his Adam's apple, hearing that—and Lydia won't marry someone who doesn't know her parents, who explain her. So Lydia has to marry Sam.

"Your mother hated me," Sam reminds her.

"Because you weren't Jewish. She'd have gotten over it eventually."

Sam had been Lydia's first boyfriend in college, her first boyfriend ever, and he always sensed that Anna foretold what Lydia could not: Sam had flipped something on inside Lydia, some brutal thing that

would never be assuaged without him or his substitute. From the relief that eased across Anna's pert features each time Lydia left a room or stepped through airport security or got handed to her father, Sam had felt distinctly that Anna had preferred her daughter before that switch was pulled; he didn't tell Lyd then because they'd only been together a few months, and he wouldn't tell her now or ever because Anna is dead and consecrated.

Sam tugs Lydia up off her knee, steps her from his snowy brick front porch into his lamplit, space-heated, floral-wallpapered living room. He snaps the box closed around the orange-foil condom in her hand.

"This isn't what your mom would have wanted," Sam says.

"No," Lydia agrees. "It's what I want."

And there she is, in clear relief: Lydia Goldstein, his first girlfriend, the closest he ever got to a mother of his children, daughter of pliant Ari and selfish Anna, who inherited all and only her mother's traits: the long limbs, thin trunk, wide hips, curled hair, self-indulgence, and utter, obvious love for Ari. Sam remembers Lyd's and his first winter break from college, first meeting them, Ari and Anna—watching Ari slice an apple for his ex-wife at the cutting board, Anna hovering, plucking his fingers out of the blade's path, feeding the core to Ari's newest dog and Lydia's little brother's favorite, a smart, savvy pug named Shmutz—and thinking they were the most loving divorced couple he had ever seen, gentler with each other than his own married parents, who sniped at insignificant things like grammar and separating glass from plastic.

Lydia holds her cell phone to Sam's ear. "Hello?" says a voice, comically miniatured as Sam pulls away and reads the text on the screen: *Daddy!* In ten years, other people have found pathways Lydia is still looking for. Lyd was a homebody out of childishness, Sam had told her in college, convincing her onto rickety charter planes he's afraid of now. But perhaps her problem is geographic, not developmental. Lyd belongs in some Eastern civilization, India or Vietnam; the Western world is inhospitable to people who want only to love their families.

"Say something," Lydia stage-whispers. "You'll talk to Aunt Eileen next, then my cousins, and you remember Devon, don't you?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Sam says, intending to finish, *I called the wrong number*, but Ari's voice, pathetic and small in the cell phone's speaker, says, "Thank you."

The thing that controls Sam tightens to a hard lump. "This is Samuel Johnson, Mr. Goldstein," it says, choking. "I've got Lydia"—and he pictures that November night again, he feels it this time, the sensation of holding Lydia's cold, limp feet like defrosting chicken in his hands, stretching wide the lip of the socks she'd kicked onto his windowsill, drawing them down carefully around each foot, ball to heel, as she slept. The trust she hadn't known she'd put in him, to warm her.

"Do you still love me?" Sam says. He has boiled green tea at the kitchen counter, watched her spill green tea on her phone, deposited the phone in a tupperware of dry Minute Rice, seized the opportunity to speak to her and not her every extended relative, now congregating down in New Jersey for the funeral.

"I asked you to marry me," Lydia answers. Doesn't answer.

Does Sam still love Lydia? She doesn't ask. He surveys her, his first girlfriend, doing her distracted-Lydia thing: she flips the velvet box absently opened and closed with her thumb, the tip of an orange wrapper flashing like a tongue. Then she does a new Lydia thing: releases the box, hugs her arms tight around herself, clutches her own twisted fingertips like a crippled prayer. She is at once herself and someone unfamiliar. Perhaps Sam could love her again, this motherless girl with the box. But he doesn't love her still.

"You'll give me an ulcer waiting for an answer, Milt," says Lydia, and Sam pats her affectionately on the shoulder. They used to play-act, he and Lyd, being an old married couple. They'd given each other alter egos: Milton and Shirley. Lydia's grandparents' names, her father's parents. The real Shirley had died at fifty-seven, a heart attack, and Milton lived—lives?—embittered, in assisted living in central New Jersey. But Sam and Lydia's versions lived companionably in Boca Raton toward the end of a long retirement, she fixing him pastrami sandwiches, he demanding hot sauce. Sam had kept this game a secret from his friends. They'd have mocked his prudish roleplay, the antithesis of sex, but he

had always found it a bizarre turn-on. He and Lydia were staging a future together, one that assumed decades of carnal history and therefore portended them.

Sam's hand stills, slinks experimentally behind Lydia's shoulder to the base of her neck. They have the condom. They could correct the mistake that other thing in Sam had made, sleep together the way they should have a decade ago, safe. Or not. They could correct their mistake another way, sleep together unprotected, get married, carry the baby through.

Lydia's head falls heavier on Sam's hand, exposing her white neck, two thin hemispheres of lines newly scooped across her throat. Sam senses a whole constellation of possibilities opening before him. His life has grown stagnant. He has lived here in this little house in Watertown for ten years, since he left Lydia to the stirrups and scalpel. Every few semesters, he has been teaching adjunct classes at the continuing education center where he got a part-time master's in public affairs. He has attended friends' weddings, friends' second weddings, even. He has been named honorary Uncle to babies, children of high school friends, whose names he can't remember.

He could take this crazy bet. He could pick up, get married, start a family, name the baby Anna or a rough male variant. Hadn't he wanted, when he was younger—when he was dating and then not dating Lydia—a life of sudden decisions and constant uprootings? He'd so thoroughly eschewed attachments that he'd had no reason to go anywhere. So he'd stayed here, long enough for his eschewed attachment to come back to him.

Sam opens the box.

"Will you do the honors, Shirl?" he asks, and Lydia lifts the foil wrapper like a diamond and tries to tear it with her teeth.

"I always thought that might be sexy," she says, failing, flipping on his bedside lamp, retrieving her glasses from the nightstand where her clothes lay intermingled with his, tearing the orange packaging carefully in her fingertips.

She removes the disc of latex from its packet and grows suddenly

shy, handing it to him and setting her glasses down, peering at the soldered-shut doorknob beside his pillow while he unfurls the condom over himself.

"Is it on right?" she says, and Sam affirms. "You're sure?" she says.

"Sure."

"Absolutely certain?"

He climbs astride her.

"My brother Devon," she says, conversationally, as if they were meeting again over coffee at their tenth reunion, which Sam did not attend out of fear they *would* meet over coffee there, a meeting banal and forgettable, unserious. "He might need a date to the funeral. If you know any guys." Sam positions himself, readies her with the heel of his hand on her stomach—firmer now than then, he notes—a muscle memory that belongs to him and Lydia Goldstein, alone among the pairs he's been half of since.

Her hand pushes his away. Her palm lands on his chest, holding him back with a force he can't recall. "Really truly a hundred thousand percent certain?" she says, and Sam sees in her strangely tearless fear that difference he felt, between still and again. She cannot go through a mistake of theirs again; she may be going through it still. Maybe her strangeness is the Lydia equivalent of that other thing in Sam, made manifest now in his Lydia. His unfamiliar, motherless Lydia, gambling on a future with him.

Sam crawls backward until he's no longer on the bed, the bed is Lydia's, she fills it and can have it. Lydia slides her legs closed, crosses them at the ankles, pulls his crumpled blanket over herself to the waist. He stands.

"Lydia," Sam says. He is suddenly cold, his fingertips blue and aching. He untucks his bedding from the base of the mattress, rifles under it, and bumps into something hot as second chances. Her foot. "I can't marry you."

Lydia nods. But now at last she does that old familiar Lydia thing, she begins to cry. "My dad will be so sad," she says, and Sam senses that he and she are sitting in two different constellations, having two different conversations: that this is not a response to his refusal but its

own statement entirely, a different and truer introductory sentence, one she could have opened with on his snowy doorstep this afternoon, perhaps one that would have led them both to a different and truer conversation later and to different and truer—real, thrilling, unexpected—thoughts of marriage now.

Sam closes his fingers around her hot bare foot like a life raft, feeling her exchange her frantic pulse for the sluggishness of his own cold fists.

And now it's Ari at Sam's doorstep, ragged Ari, shivering as if trying to shake off the bitter absence he's stuck with.

"Sam." Ari nods, a showy, man-to-man gesture intended, Sam feels, to convey some wordless empathy. "I'm here for Lydia."

In the decade past, Sam has imagined his own mortification upon seeing Lyd's parents again. He'd avoided the whole Goldstein family—daughter, brother, parents—since that fateful plane ride. His last!, he's wanted to say, as if that excuses him. The trip to the Bahamas—had it been worth the loss of Lydia? Yes, Sam had thought at twenty-two, stupid, wild and reckless; No, he'd corrected for the three years since his thirtieth birthday; Perhaps, he thinks again now.

Yet here Sam is, not embarrassed—neither for himself nor for Ari, though the man is half-dressed in black slacks and a tattered black dress shirt on Sam's icy doorstep. Grief has dignified even Ari's unbuttoned cuffs.

Sam leaves Ari outside and finds Lydia, perched at the edge of his bed, fully clothed. He hooks his arm through hers. Walks her to the precipice of the front porch. Ari watches her approach, his face softening when she steps into the waning sunlight of the outdoors. The landscape is reflecting oddly in his right eye, Lyd appearing there like an angel haloed on her father's snowy cornea.

Sam hands Lydia to her father. He watches them walk arm-in-arm to their old blue Ford Taurus, something so astonishing in the steadiness of their gaits that he nearly calls out, *Take care of her!* before he catches his voice in his reason and gazes after the car's path through the snow until it turns a corner.

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3

Devon doesn't think he can explain it: he's getting married. To the most, the *most* unlikely person.

An Amish boy. A boy like the sad little farm kids that used to hang alongside his mother's handwriting on his father's fridge. A lost boy at The Dive beside Anna's bookshelf-width house, drinking a Budweiser, wearing a brave, stern face that said he was in control of himself when he wasn't. A false brave face that Devon had recognized, because he wore it so often himself.

Devon had pulled up a barstool beside the boy, who'd bristled with disgust. "Surprise," the boy had corrected. His accent was German.

Sometimes, Devon saw things. Premonitions were like handwriting, some people's clear and precise, others' an unreadable scrawl. Devon had a calligraphic premonition then: his father would hate this foreign-seeming boy with the German accent. Devon hoped the two would never meet.

"I've been sitting in this booth every day for a month," said the boy. "You're the first English man to sit with me."

An Englishman. Now Devon laughed with surprise, laced through with delight. No one ever guessed he was a quarter English, his features were so swarthy, and his mother hadn't considered herself anything but Jewish since her conversion. "I'm Jewish!" Devon said, but the boy—Aaron, his name was Aaron—didn't smile.

"Jewish, Muslim, Hindu," Aaron said. He shrugged. "You are not Amish."

The Amish rarely elected to remain in the English world after their Rumspringa years; to stay meant eschewing the sanctity of their families in favor of cell phones and laptops and high-rises and loneliness, that ubiquitous loneliness Devon had felt since moving to Boston. Loneliness in every bar and every bedroom, the boarder that doesn't pay rent. The Amish fathers sending their eighteen-year-olds into the world to be eaten alive, Devon thought, must hide a smirk as they wave goodbye: they had stacked the deck. They were like Devon's own father, sending Lydia up the Eastern seaboard with a suitcase she couldn't lift. They had crippled their children, then told the kids to limp.

But Aaron had found a crutch in Devon, and Devon conceived of himself as a wet nurse: nurturing someone else's child, orphaned in the English world, with his own stand-in offerings. Books. Slang. Khan Academy science videos, which his father swore by. A stick shift. A gym membership. A concave, academic chest. A light palm cradling the nape of a neck.

When Devon tells Aaron that his mother has died—Devon: heaving, crying, standing hatless in the cold outside the Harvard Square T—Aaron answers, "Will you marry me?" Devon thinks Aaron must have misheard him, his voice stolen in the New England wind so they are having two different conversations, but Aaron assures him he has heard. "You need a family," he says, as though family were standing water transferred to a different cup.

Devon has a family, his sister and father, but now that family is based entirely on a love of chance and obligation, not of choice. When Lydia calls, mere moments after Devon has accepted the proposal, he wants to answer with his news. But he refrains. He senses with a minimum of bitterness that his excitement would sharpen rather than allay her grief.

He plans to meet her on the train to Westwood, his sister who lives in Beacon Hill seemingly as a front. Lydia may as well rent a futon at Boston South Station. Devon still feels guilty, responsible, for reviving the constant traveling she hadn't undertaken since Sam; Devon had phoned his sister last year, waiting in that stifling car after yoga class, to talk about Aaron. He'd explained his fear that Dad would rather die than see him married—but she'd taken his anxiety as premonition, and premonition about her, because that was how Lydia was. "What if you do marry this guy?" she'd said. "Your fiancé will meet Dad. What about mine?"

Future-scared as always, his sister. Understandable in the immediate aftermath of that long-ago abortion, but Dad indulged her: Dad so in love with his ex-wife and daughter—with women—that he has molded his life in their image, mollifying or waiting to fit their flares and withdrawals. Devon, to Dad, is gruff and rigid. Devon imagines that Ari, when he imagines him, sees him stoic in the Boston cold.

Not haunted by dream-visions of delicacy and loss, fine china sliding off tables, cold toes turning slowly blue and black, but sturdy and certain. Impervious.

Devon's father and sister have never met Aaron, but his mother did, once, unknowingly. There is only one affordable gym in Lancaster, the Y where Anna taught daily morning yoga, so Devon brought Aaron to afternoon classes. Lydia was the one who had accepted their mother's yoga, Lydia who was all Ari, saying yes and yes, not fighting for or back; Devon had sat through a few classes, skeptically, liking yoga only as long as Aaron's body was stretching and lengthening beside his. It was not a sexual admiration he so enjoyed, hips open in triangle pose, but a certitude that their bodies were experiencing the same thing at the same time: the same muscular tugs and pulls and twists: a simultaneity of sensation of which he was never otherwise sure.

That afternoon, a year or so after meeting Aaron—a year or so before Devon's mother would die of a brain aneurism, alone in her quiet house—Devon snuck late into yoga, just off a three o'clock train into the city after checking on his eye-patched father, giggling, holding Aaron's hand. They unfurled their mats close beside each other in the back of the crowded room, then turned their attention to the demonstration mat at the front. Devon startled; he was staring into his mother's green eyes, hooked on his for half a second, then swept to Aaron and the class's strangers.

His mother had the class hugging themselves in preparation for garudasana arms, deep yoga breaths, one two three. "Visualize the thing you want to hold the closest," she said. "How you would clutch a starry evening on a softball field, if only you could. How you would hug your daughter if she'd been scooped out."

Devon couldn't believe it: his mother had seen him but not recognized him, her punctual son sneaking in as he did at the last minute, wearing tight yoga pants, not forewarning her he'd be in Lancaster, holding the hand of a boy. She must have assumed he was someone else.

"Now you let go," she said. "You love yourself alone, you hold your own hand." In all the times he'd attended his mother's classes, out

of guilt that he visited Lancaster far more often than he visited her, Devon had never heard her say something that sounded as personal as this. "We're opening our green heart chakra. Picture the chakras as little discs, thousands of them, tiny records spinning on the turntable of your body. Perfectly aligned, they sing so loud that even angels are astonished."

Devon was grateful for his mop of hair, lank and unnoticeable like his father's, which he let fall over his face. Nonetheless, he knew he couldn't hide for long; when his mother rose to circle the room, he scrambled to his feet, left his mat on the floor, and spent half an hour on the phone in his parked car until Aaron slid into the driver's seat, red-faced and limber.

"You didn't miss anything," Aaron said. "I didn't like her."

"That was my mother," said Devon, feeling something shift between them, the power sluiced into Aaron's hands, some permission taken but never granted.

Devon cancels his class, Philosophy of the Divine, for the funeral. He used to be in awe of Professor Harmon, his advisor, who at seventy-seven has never missed a day of class; Devon had wanted to be like him; but now, the attendance record seems more failure than accomplishment. Was there nothing, in forty-odd years of teaching, more important than a class full of serious Harvard students wound tight as a coil of hair? No one for whom Professor Harmon would drop everything, cancel his life, arrive prepared to pray or fight or hold or simply cry?

Devon's sister Lydia, it seems to him, has cancelled her whole life in order to hold on and cry. His father, too, standing in socks that blocked the light beneath Devon's childhood doorway. Before Aaron, Devon had long decided that he would chart a life of his own. He would be Anna's, all Anna's, unlike Lydia with nothing of their mother in her, nothing unattached or independent. Before Aaron, Devon had faulted Lydia for being all Ari: clinging so hard she crushes the thing in her hand.

Devon's sister brings a boy to the funeral—not Sam, though Devon hasn't dared ask why not. Devon hopes Sam was embarrassed to see

the Goldsteins again, after what he did to Lyd, but maybe he was too busy planning yet another international jaunt. Jose Three, Devon's father calls Sam's substitute. She met him on line at the CVS beside the temple. She'd been trying to buy a pair of socks.

Ari had insisted he was glad to drive his children south from Boston, but Devon had watched his father's face collapse, seeing Lydia climb instinctively to the backseat to give Devon the front: who would be Ari's instinctive partner, Devon wondered, moving forward? Though she hadn't seen Devon's grandfather in a decade, Anna had attended Pop Milton's funeral last year, unthinkingly flipping Dad's prayerbook to the proper page. Pop had left Lydia money he didn't leave Devon, but Devon hadn't minded; he'd taken the compliment, the younger sibling but the more competent. Now, though: now Devon wonders if Pop who so loved Nana Shirley had seen premonitions, too, images of German-speaking Amish boys expending his inheritance.

Devon and his meager remaining family follow Aunt Eileen into the synagogue, filing into the first row of seats before the raised bimah. The temple's electric eternal light flickers like a star that turns out to be an airplane—*The saddest thing in the world*, Devon's mother told him once, sitting on her back porch in Lancaster sipping a glass of icy scotch, watching the night sky. Then her daughter had started traveling the world and the whole blinking sky had become Lydia, flying toward her from a foreign ocean, sidestepping north to New Jersey at the last minute.

Lydia sits next to their father, of course, and Devon hesitates a moment before taking the metal folding chair on Ari's left side. His mother's death, he realizes, has abolished the seating arrangement of his family. Ari-Lydia-Devon-Anna. The children buffers, Lydia used to say; the parents bookends, Devon would reply.

Lydia, bizarrely, has pinned a piece of white lace like a veil to her brown curls, though the women in their synagogue do not cover their heads. To the lace she has affixed a small triangle of orange foil that looks to Devon like the gum wrappers he taught Aaron to fold into chains, going over and over the groove of his own childhood in order to share it.

Ari leans companionably into Devon's ear. "She's a manslayer," he whispers, and at first Devon thinks he means Lydia, who's stuck Jose Three in the temple's back corner, beside a creeping water stain. But then he realizes that his father means Mom, because here Ari and Devon are at the front of the synagogue where Devon once squeaked through his Bar Mitzvah, both in black suits and black yarmulkes, used handkerchiefs tucked into their pockets. Who will take care of them all, now that Anna isn't here to send them even, tempered postcards filled with family?

Beside the handkerchief in his pocket, Devon's phone buzzes: Aaron's number on the screen, though he has instructed Aaron not to call him, not now, under no circumstance is Aaron to call. Ari pushes the phone back into Devon's pocket, but Devon swats his father's hands away, the name backlit in his palm, the photo of Aaron—shirtless at the Lancaster pool, a hand on his chest that could be Aaron's but Devon knows is his own—an insistent premonition: something bad has happened. Is happening.

"What could be so important—," Ari begins.

A foreboding ventilator drone is thrumming in Devon's ears. Devon feels tired, bone-tired, his palm buzzing again and again, his healthy mother lying in a casket half a mile down the road, all bets off. "My boyfriend," Devon mumbles into his father's truncated left ear—long past childhood, there's still something frightening about that earlobe, a metonym for blade and blood—intending half to test Ari's reaction and half to surrender, throw up his unclenched hands here at his mother's sudden funeral. As Devon heads for the sun-steeped lobby, he watches his father carefully: a look of confusion passes over Ari's features, free of revulsion or even alarm. Devon wonders for the second time in as many days whether other people even hear him.

"Yes?" says Devon.

"I made a mistake."

Devon thinks of other men, of cold sores, of blood tests. He doesn't want to hear. Devon likes to read his news, he likes his news of the world soft and couched in poetry. He likes to stay up nights, cradling

Aaron's cold hands in his warm ones, watching Aaron breathe. His favorite of their many dogs had been Gamma, the contemplative labradoodle and the last of his father's pets, named during Lydia's brief flirtation with a physics major, who heeled plaintively and never barked.

"I know you don't like to cancel your class," Aaron says, "so I taught it."

"You what?"

"I didn't know what to say, I freaked. I told the students about the heart chakra. I put them into garudasana."

Devon is still waiting for the mistake.

"Something happened," Aaron says. "I wanted you to hear." He rustles the phone away from his ear, out into Devon's wood-paneled classroom in the basement of the religious studies building—and Devon hears, comically miniatured, a sort of singing. A hum like wind or static. *Referential mania*, he thinks, the world gone fuzzy on his behalf, some angel fumbling, his serious students wrung into release.

By the time Devon resumes his seat, his father is flipping aimlessly through a prayer book. Lydia glances once to the back of the synagogue, as if Jose Three might know the proper page, then inspects Devon's open siddur. His father and his sister: tearing vellum, searching.

Tomorrow, Aaron will come help take care of them.

Devon has a premonition of heartbreak: the cold gray of tomorrow morning, Aaron arriving by stick-shift in jeans, Lydia jealous, Ari's face solemn, hard and set, the half-heard admission confirmed; Devon tries to foresee a smile at the corner of his father's lips.

But now, Devon can't sink into that familiar portentous drone. Now he has to be a new Devon, a motherless Devon, with no good reason to go visiting Lancaster. Now he and Lydia have to read the Mourner's Kaddish. He presses the premonition aside and squeezes Ari's shoulder, rises in his black yarmulke beside his sister in her white lace, offers his elbow as he and Lydia walk the aisle to the bimah under the eternal light.