

## DANDELION WISH

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Another Virgin Mary sighting. There's always a sighting. In someone's donut sprinkles or hamburger bun. Something oozy and shiny in a shower stall, streaked down a mirror. Our Lady's image on a red balloon hanging from a telephone wire, crowds of people staring up. This one, in a Las Vegas parking garage.

We were sitting on our sagging wicker couch—me, Mom, my boyfriend, the three of us awash in the blue glow of late night TV, six feet propped on the old steamer trunk we use as a coffee table. Jess's boots, me and Mom barefoot. Jess had the remote. He was flipping through the channels looking for baseball scores when Mom shouted, "Go back." Like she was yelling *get out of the street*. He clicked till she snapped, "Stop." She lifted her feet off the table, leaned forward, and watched the news.

“Employees at Fidelity Federal arriving to work this morning were surprised to find the image of the Virgin Mary on a wall of the first level of the building’s parking garage. The night security guard reported seeing nothing unusual during his shift.”

Behind the newsman, people stood in front of a wall. The camera zoomed in on a close-up of cracks in the stucco that vaguely resembled the Virgin Mary.

Mom thought it was a miracle. After three surgeries, all the chemo and radiation, she still believed in the whole shebang: The Holy Trinity, angels and saints, the Virgin Mary. I wanted to take her straight to Fidelity Federal. When I told Jess the next morning, he looked surprised. He leaned against the kitchen counter, arms crossed.

“You believe?” he asked.

I’d spent too much time in the oncologist’s waiting room watching people turn yellow. They got smaller and smaller and then disappeared. But how to explain the tiny part of me that had faith in Mom’s faith, believed if she believed it was a miracle, she’d get well.

“It’s that bad?”

“Let me show you.”

I grabbed my laptop off the kitchen counter, walked over to the table and pushed the napkins and salt and pepper shakers to the other end, made room for my computer.

Jess moved a chair closer to mine, sat down. “Cancer math?” he asked.

I typed in Mom’s age, tumor specifics, number of positive nodes.

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“Pathology reports.”

“Huh?”

I stopped typing and looked at Jess. “Tumors are sent to labs and checked for things like size and what kind of cancer. Doctors need to know this stuff so they can figure out how to treat the patient. That information is the pathology.”

“Your Mom gives you her pathology reports?”

“Not exactly.”

“How did you figure out what the words mean?”

I tapped the computer. “Internet.”

I plugged in the rest of Mom’s statistics and pushed *calculate*. Jess leaned forward, mouthed the words I knew by heart: *five percent chance of survival*.

“Whoa.” He sat back, stared at the computer then turned and looked at me. “What will you do?”

I shrugged my shoulders and leaned down to pick up the cat.

“Go live with your dad?”

“I can’t. He’s . . .” I could feel my stomach clench. “I just can’t.”

Dad’s been gone a long time. He sends money. Not often and never enough. I visited once, about five years ago. His girlfriend, Penny, tucked me into bed with her daughter, a whiny little four-year-old named Daphne. I spent the week pretending to have fun, but I didn’t say much more than yes, no, please, or thank you. The night before I left, I pulled the hair out of all of Daphne’s dolls and stuffed it into the toe of one of her frilly pink socks. I was never invited back.

He drops in every few months, takes me to dinner, for ice cream, on a walk on the pier -- he acts like it’s an after school TV special, father helping daughter with thorny life issues.

“We’ve got to get her to that building,” Jess said. He pounded his fist on the table.

We sat in the kitchen talking about it, working on the timing of taking the trip, but the logistics of getting her to Vegas were daunting. We were two kids in high school and she was just too sick.

## §

I don't know how he did it. Jess tried to explain. Something about acid on reflective glass, hydrofleuro—I can't even pronounce it. All I know is he spent two weekends and lots of afternoons in my backyard messing with stuff that smelled, stuff that cut up his fingers and arms. I kept the windows closed and hoped Mom wouldn't notice him out there. One Saturday morning he pulled me into the garage.

“Don't get too excited,” he said. “This is just a prototype.”

He lifted up the blanket like a silent abracadabra, and I didn't know what to say.

It was beautiful. The Virgin Mary, glowing on glass, her turquoise blue robe with streaks of pink and green and yellow gold, all shiny and shimmery like the colors in an oil slick rain puddle. She looked real, head bent like maybe she was listening to a prayer.

“The final thing will be big,” he said, spreading his arms, indicating floor to ceiling. “Really big.”

He grabbed my hand. “Come on. Let me show you.” I could feel the tension in his arm. I went inside to let Mom know we were going out. She was asleep on the couch, TV on mute, the dog and cats piled around her. I left a note—*back soon, love, A*—and slipped it under the remote.

Downtown isn’t far. Or big. This is a little beach town, a tiny dot near the border. Our business district looks like a place you’d see in an old black and white movie. The tallest building is three stories. That’s where Jess drove, to the B of A building next to the old Texaco station. He parked the truck, hopped out, came around to open my door.

“I need glass, lots of glass,” he said. “This will be perfect.” He was pacing, not really talking to me, totally lost in his calculations. I looked up. Clouds were moving across the windows and I felt a shiver shoot down my back.

That night after Jess left, after I’d washed the dishes and fed the pets, made sure there were pain pills and a glass of water on Mom’s nightstand, I tiptoed out to the garage. Fog had rolled in during the evening and the cement was cold and damp under my feet. I lifted the blanket off Mary and wrapped it around me. I sat down and stared at her. I wanted to tell her she was my last hope, but I didn’t know how.

Someone to trust. That's what we needed. We had the supplies: rope, scaffolding, heavy buckets of paint and chemicals all hidden behind the garage, the messy dirty place between the fence and back wall. But we still needed help. Someone who would never tell. Never ever.

Jess snapped his fingers. "What about Sergio," he asked.

"Your dad's ranch hand?"

"Yeah."

"Sergio's the shorter one, right?" Jess's dad had two guys working for him, feeding horses, mucking out stalls and corrals.

"Yeah. The one you were talking to last Sunday."

"Oh, yeah." Sergio was practicing English and I had tried some Spanish. We sat on the rail fence and watched Jess throw circles with his rope.

"He's nice enough, but will he keep quiet?"

"Abby, he barely speaks English."

"That doesn't mean he won't tell. He talks, Jess. And he's got friends and family." He'd shown me pictures of three little girls. Gabriella, Isabella, and another one with a name that rhymed. Lived in Mexico, he'd said, and I'd wondered what it was like living in Mexico. Did they have electricity? A phone in the house?

“I know. But I have a good feeling about him,” Jess said.

I had no feeling.

“Come on. We’ll talk to him together.”

I understood *ventana* and *pintura*. *Milagro*. When Jess said, “Madre,” Sergio looked at me, touched his head, said, “Si, calva. Mi abuelita, tambien.” I Googled the words later at home. That’s when I realized he was saying his grandmother, also.

Jess was full of logistical chatter as he drove me home. He needed batteries for the lights. Extension ladders, he wondered, one or two. Every once in a while I nodded, said, “Uh-huh.”

“Probably best,” he said, “to wait for a new moon.”

“I can’t remember. New is no moon, right?”

“Yeah.” He lifted the visor up, ducked his head, I guess looking for the moon. “And maybe fog. Or clouds. Muffles the sound, you know.”

He pulled into our driveway and I opened my door, but he grabbed my hand.

“Abby, don’t worry.”

I said, “Okay,” but I was worried. Mom needed to believe this was a miracle or it wouldn’t work. And it had to work.

I checked for the moon before I went in. It was big and round, looked like it was sitting on top of the neighbor's tree branch, fat and sassy, a character in a kid's storybook.

The next couple of weeks I went to school, worked, said "nothing" every time Mom asked what's wrong. Nights I couldn't sleep, I went out to the garage and sat with Mini Mary. That's what I named her, Jess's prototype. I never spoke. Or prayed. Just sat with her and watched the moon wheel across the sky, creamy and white, each night smaller and smaller until it was dark.

## §

I was the lookout, stationed on the ground, alert for cars, people, anything that might get us into trouble. We had two-way radios: pink Barbie walkie-talkies I found in a box of old toys Grandma had put in the garage. They looked silly in Jess's toolbox, but they worked. I sat on the curb, clicked when I heard something so Jess could turn off the lights.

It was close to three when Jess radioed down that they were finishing up. I left the corner and was walking past the old gas pumps when Sergio took a step back. Maybe to look up, maybe he forgot where he was, but he stepped right off the scaffolding. Until the end of time I will remember that

moment he hung suspended by the ankle, the snap of the rope when it broke, Sergio falling and falling. A sickening thud. The quiet.

Too quiet. He didn't yell or scream. Or bleed. But he was breathing and somehow we got him into the back of Jess's truck and over to Mercy ER. "Fell off a ladder" is what we said. Two nurses and an orderly climbed in and shoved a board under his back, lifted him onto a gurney, and rushed him through the double doors.

Jess went back to clean up the mess. We'd left it there—all the paints and tools and rope just hanging off the scaffolding. I stayed with the clipboard of questions they wanted answered. The woman behind the counter talked in a four a.m. monotone. "Fill out the yellow parts." She swooshed a highlighter across the page. "Sign at the X's here, here, here, and here. Have a seat and wait to be called." All in one long exhaled breath.

The waiting room was loud and crowded. Smelled like ammonia and burnt coffee. And fear. The bathroom was in constant use. I took the only place left, next to a man with a bloody towel wrapped around his hand. I was worried about the paper bag in his lap, afraid he had a baggie with his cut-off finger inside.

I looked at the top page of the clipboard. Last name, first, and middle initial. I wrote in “Sergio.” And Jess’s address. That’s all I knew. I leaned back and listened to the TV weather guy talk about snow flurries in the east, cold and dry across the plains, an area of low pressure up and down the coast. I watched the arrows move across the states.

Hail Mary, full of grace. Twelve years of Catholic school, it’s hard not to pray. But you know what? It doesn’t work. And those fifteen promises of Mary—a lie. Especially number eleven: *You shall obtain all you ask of me by the recitation of the rosary.* I prayed all through fifth grade, summer too, and still Mom’s cancer spread. When I asked Sister Mary Therese how come, she bent down and tapped my heart with her finger. She smelled like restaurant mints, the kind you twist open from both ends. “Sweetie,” she said, “you have to really believe.” I didn’t want to make things worse for Sergio. I stopped praying.

Night was fading when Jess returned and nothing, still no word. The waiting room had emptied. I wondered if Mom was awake yet, if she knew I was gone. We sat and stared at the double doors. Shiny silver doors with no windows. Finally, someone came out and asked for Sergio’s family. Dr. Mack, his name tag said. He stared at the wall behind us. Crossed and uncrossed his

arms. Talked fast. “Intracranial pressure, reticular activating system. Three on the GCS score.” He had a tiny red dot on his sleeve and I wondered if it was blood. Whose it was.

“GCS?” Jess asked.

“Glasgow Coma Scale,” the doctor said.

Jess reached for my hand. I felt a clump of something hard stick in my chest. *Coma* was a word we understood.

## §

“I’m gonna have to call my dad.”

I watched Jess’s face tighten. His lips were a straight line. I was afraid too, but he was right, we needed a grownup.

Jess went outside and I watched the weather map. They were tracking a rain event across the Rockies. Fourteen degrees in Minnesota, but felt like eight. I wondered how they knew.

Jess came back, picked up a *Good Housekeeping* magazine and started turning pages, fast, without looking. He set the magazine on the chair next to him, slid his hands across his thighs like he was wiping them dry.

“He’s on his way.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Fell off a ladder.”

“What did he say?”

“What do you think he said, Abby? He asked what the hell he was doing on a ladder in the middle of the night.”

“What . . .?”

“Painting.”

Made sense. If you think about the things people use ladders for—washing windows and cleaning gutters, changing a light bulb—painting would be the most believable.

“Painting what?” I asked.

“A surprise for your mom. While she was sleeping.”

I knew he’d believe it. People will do most anything to avoid thinking about Mom. They just don’t know what to say.

Jess was thumbing through the magazine again.

“What room?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“We should know what room.”

“Sun porch?”

“Yeah, that works.”

I stared at the floor, dragged the toe of my shoe across the black wavy lines in the linoleum squares. There was a pattern. The lines should have matched up, but they didn't.

§

Jess's dad smelled like outside: dirt, hay, and some kind of soap. He hugged his son, patted me on the shoulder, sat down with the clipboard and shuffled through papers he pulled from his pocket. He filled in everything I'd left blank. I watched him talk to the lady behind the counter. He lifted his hat with one hand, pushed his fingers through his hair with the other, put his hat back on. He's a big man. Looks like what he is: a man who walks his land checking the fences. Sells cattle and horses at auction. Raises boys to ride rodeo. I wondered if he felt as out of place as he looked—a cowboy in a beach town.

He left the counter, stood in front of us, hands in his pockets, jingling keys and coins. "You kids get on home. I'll wait here."

"Aren't you going to call his family?" Jess asked.

I remembered Sergio pulling out his wallet to show me the pictures of the three girls, pointing to each as he said their name. His wallet was soft leather and falling apart, tied together with a striped shoelace.

“I want to talk to the doctor before I call. They’ll have questions.”

Probably the same ones slogging through my head: will he wake up? Be okay? Walk, talk, jump? Remember what happened and tell the police? I hated that thought, that I could be so selfish.

“You kids go. Manny could use your help today.”

Jess nodded, said, “Yes, sir.”

“You,” he looked at me, “get some rest. Say hello to your mother.”

He put his hand on Jess’s shoulder, said, “It’ll be okay.”

## §

It was mid-morning by the time we stumbled out of the hospital and headed home. So worried about Sergio, we’d almost forgotten what we’d done till we noticed the traffic. Cars inching along, police officers at the signals, lots of TV vans. And people, tons of people on the sidewalks all heading downtown. Jess parked the truck and we got out and followed, all of us pushing into the parking lot to see the window of the B of A building. Hundreds smooshed together staring up at the Virgin Mary, taking pictures with their cell phones held high in the air. A kid passed by pulling a wagon with water bottles on ice. He wove his way into the crowd, yelling “Water, buck a bottle.” Already, someone profiting from our miracle.

We stood there under a jacaranda tree, its petals falling in purple puddles around our feet. Jess wrapped his arms around me and I leaned back into his chest, closed my eyes.

§

At home, Mom was in the kitchen making tea. “Want some?” she asked.

I wanted a shower, ten hours of sleep, and a hug from a mother who wasn’t dying.

“Oh, no thanks. I’m full.” I patted my stomach hoping she’d assume I’d been out to breakfast.

“I wondered where you were.”

She dipped the tea bag a few times, wrapped it in a paper towel, shuffled off to the trash.

“I’ll carry this in for you, Mom.” I set the cup on the table next to the couch, made sure she had her book, remote, phone. I looked at the walls and thought it too bad we hadn’t really painted in here. Once she was settled, I put a blanket across her legs, folded the corner into a V she could pull up later if she got cold.

“I’ve got some homework to do, Mom. I’ll be in my room if you need anything.” I hated lying, but a nap would have sent a maternal alert. I never nap. Homework, she’d believe.

Three hours later, I woke up hot and cranky, worried about Sergio. I wondered if his treatment would be different if they knew the truth—he’d fallen twenty feet, not eight. I wondered what kind of sin this lie was. I wanted to call Jess, but I was afraid his dad might answer the phone and ask me questions. Or want to talk to Mom. I took a shower and came out to the sun porch just as Mom was yelling for me. Her voice was excited. Had energy.

It was just like I’d pictured it, Mom watching TV, remote in hand, yelling “Abby, come see this,” me running down the hallway as I always do, getting there at the end of whatever she wanted me to see.

“Abby.” She looked back at the TV. “Oh, darn. It’s over.” She started clicking. “Maybe it’s on other channels.”

“What?” I hoped my face looked innocent and blank.

“Hang on. Let me see if I can find it.”

I watched weather, sports, news click past at lightning speed. Finally Mom gave up, put the TV on mute.

“Abby. The Virgin. She’s here.” Mom’s face looked lit from within.

“Here?” I looked around the room.

“Not here. In town.”

“Really? Where?”

“Downtown. E Street. No. D Street, I think.”

“What do you mean here? Like a person walking around?”

She gave me a withering look. “No, Abby. I mean there’s been an appearance. A . . .” Mom’s been fumbling more for words lately. She looked down at the couch like she might find it there. I knew she meant sighting, but she gets frustrated when I help so I waited. “Sighting.”

“Where? On a slice of toast?” She knows I don’t believe, that I always make fun of these appearances. I needed to make sure I was behaving as usual.

“Not toast. Or a waffle, either.” She sort of smiled. “In a window. An office building. Let’s see if they show it again.” She patted the cushion next to her and I sat. Mom clicked back and forth between news stations till finally, there it was.

“Hey,” she said. She raised the volume and we listened. “Ed and Gail, I’d guess this crowd to be . . .” The reporter turned around like she was just now

considering a rough estimate. “. . . maybe three hundred or so. They keep pouring in, don’t they, Victor?” And now the screen switched to another reporter standing on a freeway overpass at the edge of town showing us footage taken an hour ago. “The freeways are bumper to bumper, and the streets in and out of downtown are closed. If you want to see the Virgin, you’re going to have to walk.” The picture went back to the windows, a three-story Virgin Mary, the camera slowly pulling back, the Virgin getting smaller so we could see the crowd which was maybe four times bigger than this morning.

“Oh, Abby, let’s go see.”

## §

People everywhere, spilling off the sidewalks, walking faster than we could drive. Cars clogged the roads. Jess inched his way into the first parking spot we saw. We’d brought the wheelchair Mom uses for longer distances. Jess grabbed it from the back and we waited as Mom limped out of the truck. Once she was seated, he squatted down and lifted her feet onto the footrests.

“All right,” he said. “I’m gonna get you there, right up front. So hang on.”

He plowed through the crowd, pushing the chair, sometimes rolling on just the back wheels. I followed, hanging onto his shirt, afraid I'd lose them both if I didn't.

As promised, he got us front row, behind the brick planter underneath the window, eye level with the hem of Mary's robe. There were cards and notes. Crosses stuck in the dirt of the planter. Candles. And flowers in vases, pots, tied in bouquets. Offerings for the Virgin.

We all wanted something.

People took pictures of the window. Talked to each other, voices low. I saw some of Mom's church friends praying the rosary, beads sliding through their fingers. Someone was selling candles, red or blue, five dollars.

Mom tilted her head back and looked up. She crossed herself in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Her hand hovered above her right shoulder like she'd forgotten to put it back in her lap. I took it in mine, but I don't think she even knew we were holding hands. I hoped she was lost in the presence of Our Lady. That this was it—the miracle. All those nights soothing me to sleep, her hand on my back rubbing circles in rhythm to her words: "Just wait for the miracle, Abby. Believe."

What we hadn't known, couldn't have known, is what would happen at sunset—that the glass would catch the colors of the sky, all the pink, red, and gold reflected in the window, almost like a glimmering halo around Mary's head. The crowd hushed. Like the quiet in church just before mass. Someone in back, a man, started singing "Ave Maria," his voice beautiful and true.

Mom squeezed my hand. I knelt next to her. She turned from Mary, looked at me and said, "Thank you, Abby."

I looked up at Jess. He had a small tight smile. We were worried about Sergio. His dad said he'd been transferred to ICU, but there was no change. His family was on the way, would be here tomorrow. That made my stomach jump. I thought about the pictures of his girls and I felt in trouble.

The sun dropped behind the building across the street and the candles flickered in the dusk. Jess needed to get going so we shuffled back to the truck.

At home, I heated some soup and poured it into a mug for Mom. She drank half, said she was tired, she was going to bed. I washed the dishes and filled the dog's water bowl, and walked around the house turning off lights. I brushed my teeth and crawled into bed exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. Sergio was falling. Over and over and over.

My room felt scary. I pulled on a jacket and pants, went out to the garage and lifted the blanket off Mini Mary. She was more detailed than the downtown version. Had a darker robe. Darker eyes. Eyes that knew what we'd done, but still, she smiled. I was just too tired. Scared and worried. I couldn't stop the tears. I cried. For myself, for Mom, for Sergio. For all of us out there today. I cried till I was goopy and snotty and couldn't breathe. I wiped my nose on my sleeve, looked at Mary and whispered, "Please."

### §

It was impossible to pretend he was sleeping—Sergio was hooked up to so many machines. He had tubes in his nose and mouth and both arms, a ventilator and a catheter. There were flashing blips and bleeps, blue lines and green digital numbers. A medical Morse code.

The ICU nurse didn't want to let me in and definitely didn't believe I was his sister.

"Oh really," she said, eyes on my hair—not brown, not blonde, sort of the color of wet sand.

"Okay, look," I said. "You're right. I'm not his sister. I just need to see him. Please."

She stared at me.

“It’s really important.”

This was probably the only time alone I’d get with him once his family arrived tomorrow. I needed—I’m not sure what I needed. But I wanted to tell him I was sorry.

“Come on,” she said. I followed her to a little cubicle of a room. She looked at the machines and checked the IV, timed something on her watch and wrote it down on a clipboard.

“Five minutes,” she said. I listened to her shoes squeak down the hallway.

I pulled an orange plastic chair closer to the head of his bed, sat down on the edge of it and looked at Sergio through the silver metal bed rails. I touched his hand.

“Sergio.”

Nothing. Not even eyelid fluttering.

“Sergio. It’s me. Abby.”

The ventilator whooshed.

“Listen. I want you to know I’m sorry.” I looked behind me, made sure no one had walked into the room. “I’m really sorry you fell. It’s my fault. You were just doing something nice for my mom.” I pulled the chair closer.

“You’ve got these girls, Sergio. Isabella, Gabriella.” I couldn’t remember the third one. “They need you. They need their dad. I know what it’s like. And trust me, they need you. So get better. Okay?”

I heard the nurse’s shoes. I stood up, leaned over and brushed the hair off his forehead, same way Mom always does to me when I’m sick. The nurse walked in.

“Thank you,” I said.

Halfway home I remembered: Estella, that’s the third one’s name.

## §

“It’s working for other people,” I told Jess.

We were on our way to the hospital to see Sergio. I hadn’t told him about last night.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Some old guy dumped his cane. Someone else stopped coughing.”

“Really?” He slapped the steering wheel. “Hot damn.”

“Did you see this morning’s newspaper?”

He shook his head. “No, just heard something on TV.”

“Had a picture of a pile of crutches and a walker.”

“How’s your mom?” he asked.

“Same.”

This morning after eleven-o'clock mass, I'd stood behind Mom's wheelchair in

the parish hall and listened to the swirl of conversation:

“Did you see?”

“Have you heard?”

“Ginny Crawford stopped coughing.”

“Toby Blankenship ditched his cane.”

It was true. I'd seen him walk up the aisle for communion, not even a limp.

I'd been paying attention, hoping to hear Mom say something about feeling different. So far today she looked the same as yesterday. No change. No miracle. Same old sick Mom.

Jess reached over, put his hand on mine.

“So how's it feel?” I asked him.

“What?”

“The whole town is going crazy and it's your creation.”

He took his hand back, grabbed the steering wheel, rolled the window down with his left and stuck his arm out like an airplane wing.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Just thought maybe it would help you is all.”

### §

At the hospital we sat in the fifth-floor lobby and waited for a turn with Sergio. ICU rules—only two visitors at a time—and his wife and mother were with him. I was nervous about meeting them, afraid they’d ask questions about his fall, but Jess said they didn’t know much English. I leaned my head against the window, watched the people below. An ambulance pulled up to emergency and two attendants wheeled a gurney into the hospital. It all looked so slow from up here.

“Those are Sergio’s kids,” Jess pointed to the lawn near the front entrance. “And that’s his dad.”

The girls were rolling on the grass. As soon as they got to the bottom of the hill, they ran back up. It looked like they were laughing.

“You know,” he said, “I’m thinking . . .”

I jumped.

“What? Scared you?” he asked.

“Yeah. I was a billion miles away. You were thinking what?”

“We should get rid of the evidence. You know, the sample glass. The little one in your garage.”

Mini Mary.

“How come?”

“The news said something about a police investigation. We should get rid of anything that could link us.”

The girls were rolling faster and faster. Bumping into each other.

“Want me to do it?”

“No, I’ll do it,” I said.

“Don’t just throw it away, though. Smash it.”

## §

But I didn’t. Not that night. Or the next. I tried. I went out to the garage, late, sky loaded with stars, spread the blanket on the cement to wrap her in, but I ended up sitting on it instead. She was a slab of glass to Jess, his practice piece. An “it.” To me, she had become a comforting presence. I felt like she knew what I was thinking.

Jess was nervous. Police had come out to talk to his dad about Sergio. Routine questions, they said, but still scary. The crowds were getting bigger.

The story was always on the news. Even an article in last week's *People* magazine.

I was scared, too. Every time I turned the corner into Sergio's room I was afraid he'd be waiting with a policeman ready to handcuff me. I worried he'd wake up and blab the whole thing. The tiniest sliver of a sliver inside me hoped he'd stay asleep. At least till Mom was okay, then I wanted him to get better, but have selective amnesia—remember his family and how to do stuff, just forget that he was up on some scaffolding making a fake Virgin Mary.

Jess asked every day. He was getting mad.

“What's your deal, Abby?”

“I don't know. I'll do it tonight.”

“Call me after you do it.”

I went out there, set her face down on a towel and grabbed a hammer before I could think. I heard the glass break. I pounded till she looked like a pile of swept-up broken mirror. I folded the towel over the pieces then put the whole thing in a trash bag in the middle of the can, tonight's garbage on top. I called Jess, told him it was done, no problem.

I must have cut my finger on the glass. It got infected, red and hot, painful and hard to ignore. After a few days, Mom noticed.

“Let me see.”

I stuck my finger in my mouth as though I could hide it, but she reached for my hand, pulled her glasses off the top of her head and slid them on.

“Honey, this looks bad.” She got up, opened the kitchen junk drawer and fumbled around till she found a magnifying glass. She turned off the teakettle, sat at the table and pushed a chair out for me.

“Sit.”

“Ouch.” I yanked my hand away.

“We’ve got to get this taken care of. We’re going to the ER.”

“Now?” I couldn’t go to the ER with her. What if the same lady was behind the window? Same doctor?

“Yes, now. There’s something in there that needs to come out.” She stood up, startling the dog.

“Okay. I’ll go. You stay here.”

“I’m your mother and I’m taking you. Now.”

She was in mom mode, notched into high gear, pulling on a jacket, grabbing her purse and keys.

“I’ll drive,” I said. Mom hadn’t driven in a month or so.

“I want,” she grabbed the back of a kitchen chair and took a breath, “to take care of you.”

This was really happening. My mind was screaming please don’t be there, please don’t be there, hoping hospital policy gave employees every other weekend off, but nope, there she was at the window, same lady. Mom said, “My daughter . . .” and a clipboard was shoved at her so fast I almost laughed. But didn’t. My finger hurt.

I filled out the forms, gave them to the lady, relieved that she didn’t even look up, just grabbed them and slammed the glass window shut. Mom leaned her head back against the wall, closed her eyes. I sat and watched TV, an infomercial for a wonder grill. No grease. No mess. When the nurse called me back, Mom said, “You go. I’ll wait here.”

The nurse swabbed my finger, set out a sterile tray and told me to wait for the doctor. At least it was a different guy. He put on magnifying glasses, told me this was exactly the size finger he needed to add to his collection. He pulled out a tiny piece of glass, held it under the magnifier. “Can you believe,” he said, “something this small can cause such a big problem?” Of course I believed it. Ever seen a cancer cell, I wanted to ask.

## §

That was the last time Mom left the house.

I drove us home from the hospital. Just before I pulled into the driveway she asked if I still had the phone number for hospice. I felt gut punched, like the time Steve DiBartolo slugged me in the stomach. I couldn't catch my breath.

"Yeah."

"Okay," she said. Her eyes were closed, head against the seat. She smiled. A little one. "Not yet, Abby. But soon."

Mom had given me the hospice number a year or so ago. She'd talked to the doctors and nurses. Then she tried talking to me. "Would you prefer that I be transported to a facility rather than remain in the home?" she asked.

*Transport. Facility. Remain.* The words sounded like a pamphlet, cold and disconnected from what we were talking about.

"Just stay here, Mom."

"Well, Abby, that means . . ."

"I know what it means." I think I shouted it.

"You're sure?"

"Yes." I was sixteen and sure of nothing.

She did her research and chose Mary Star of the Sea. Catholic, of course.

“The number’s here, Abby.” She held up a piece of paper and put it on the refrigerator door. She explained about when to call and what would happen.

“Are you paying attention? Abby?”

I said “yes,” but I wasn’t. I wanted to pretend the remission would last forever.

It stayed there, stuck under a Disneyland magnet, a yellow Post-it that fluttered every time someone opened the refrigerator. It had a phone number and the word *hospice* written underneath in Mom’s loopy handwriting with that half-closed O she made, like it’s an opening for something to crawl in. Or out of. Somebody drew a sad face in the O. Probably my friend Becky. I saw her looking at it one afternoon when she was putting away the orange juice. She read it, walked over and gave me a hug. I don’t know who folded up the bottom and scribbled the number for Luigi’s Pizza on the back. The paper’s been there so long it became part of the kitchen landscape. Like the African violets on the windowsill and the stupid Felix the Cat clock—eyes move right, left, right, left, as the tail does the opposite.

The hospice nurses were just what I'd expected: middle-aged, capable and kind. Darlene was my favorite, probably because she knew exactly what I was feeling. She had watched her dad die then, two years later, her mom. Alone at fifteen, she lived with an aunt and uncle who didn't believe her when she told them their son was molesting her. She packed a grocery sack—I love that part, a brown grocery bag—and got on a bus from Virginia to California. She worked hard, graduated from nursing school, and here she is, she told me, living her life's purpose helping families let go of their loved ones.

“Because,” she said, as she swabbed Mom's lips, “the patient's not the one clinging, is she, sweetheart?”

I was sitting in a chair at the side of Mom's bed, patting her hand, hoping she would wake up.

“No, I guess not,” I said. I let go of Mom's hand.

Darlene sat down next to me and put her arm around my shoulder, pulled me closer.

“You know she's not going to get better; right?”

I nodded.

“You know this is the end of a long disease process.”

“I know.” It kind of croaked out in a whisper.

“When the time’s right for you and your mama, you sit close to her, take her hand and tell her it’s okay, you know, tell her you’re ready to let go. You’ll know what to say.”

“Did you? With your mom?” I was trying to picture a fifteen-year-old Darlene and couldn’t.

“You bet I did, honey. I didn’t want her lingering and suffering on account of me. I wanted to keep her long as possible, but yeah, I let her go soon as I had the strength.”

That made me feel better. She’d had to wait for strength, too.

## §

Darlene stepped out of the room when Father Mike came in. Mom was awake, sitting up in bed waiting for him. I’d cleared the dresser and put the white linen table runner on it.

“Maddy dear,” he said, stooped to kiss the top of her head, “so good to see you.”

I wanted to leave, too, but he asked if I’d care to stay, which really meant “don’t go,” so I stood by Mom and held her hand, watched the drip drop of IV fluid pulsing through the tubing into her arm. At least Mass at home was

faster than church, but I didn't like being the only "also with you" and "peace be with you" responses in the room. Dad was supposed to be here by now, but of course, he wasn't. Mom was quiet until Father Mike offered her the sacrament.

"Body of Christ."

"Amen," she whispered.

I helped her sit up straighter, then hovered, ready with a glass of water. She coughed. Sputtered. Finally swallowed.

"Abby?"

I put my arms in an X across my chest to indicate no, thank you, and tried not to flinch as his thumb made the sign of the cross on my forehead. I come from a church I can't count on. Too many unanswered prayers. Faith is a flickering flame in a red candle. Lingering scent of incense. Click of Grandma's rosary beads.

Last summer I saw Father Mike run over a cat. An orange striped tabby. I was walking home from the library and he was driving that big old blue priest car. Same kind the nuns have. He must have felt the thunk of the cat because he slowed. Stopped. Looked in the rearview mirror. But he drove away.

The cat was alive. Kind of twisting around trying to lift its head. I took off my sweatshirt and tucked it under the cat then pulled it over to the curb. I ran back to the library and asked them to call the shelter people. The cat died while I waited for them to show up.

I just can't take communion from him.

At the front door, he took my hand in both of his, said, "Abby, call anytime. We're here for you."

"Thank you, Father." I knew I'd get the answering machine at the rectory or maybe the cranky secretary if I called before five. I wondered if he had a cell phone, if he cared enough to give me that number.

"Have faith, child."

Faith is a dandelion wish floating just out of reach.

## §

Dad showed up a week later on Tuesday afternoon. I came home and there was his car parked in my spot on the driveway, Mom's blue handicapped placard already hanging from his rearview mirror.

Been gone six years, but here he was asking why I'm late.

"For what?"

"I called the school, Abby. You get out at three."

“And then I go to work, Todd.”

“That’s Dad to you, Susie Q.” He bent down to kiss my cheek. “Only father you’ll ever have.”

I wiped my face with the back of my hand. I wanted to tell him to stick around and be one, but I didn’t. I knew the rules: pretend he’s great, pretend he’s helping.

Mom had told me he was coming.

“You’ll need help,” she’d said.

“But the hospice nurse is here.”

“For after, Abby.” Her voice was soft. Like feathers. I was wearing her out.

“Okay,” I said, but she didn’t hear me. She’d fallen asleep.

I saw his precious *Abby, don’t touch* guitar in a corner of the living room. He was here to stay.

“What are these?”

He was looking at the cranes. Seventy-eight strings, ten on each, hanging from the ceiling in the dining room. He was flicking them.

“Dad, don’t.”

“What are these?” He flicked another.

“Origami cranes. A thousand is called Senbazuru.”

He was blowing on them, making them flutter.

“They’re beautiful. What are they for?”

“School project.” Same thing I told Mom when she’d asked what I was doing. She used to sit and watch me make them.

The truth was I’d found the ancient Japanese legend that promises anyone who folds one thousand paper cranes will be granted a wish. Maybe if I’d started sooner, been faster, hadn’t gotten so fancy putting the sparkly beads between each bird. I had seven hundred eighty-six of them. Each crane, twenty-four folds, my intent whispered into every single one.

I stopped when I called hospice.

§

After dinner, Dad walked into the kitchen. I was washing dishes. I could see him reflected in the window above the sink, running his hands through his hair, looking around like he was taking inventory. It made me want to hide things.

“I’d like to help,” he said.

I handed him a dishtowel. He took it, reached for a plate. I watched him, wondered what he was going to do with it once it was dry. He didn't know where anything goes.

"Honey, I'd like to help with more than the dishes."

I looked down at the sink, caught a floating bubble. One puff and it blew away.

"You don't make it easy, Abby."

I still didn't answer. I knew if I turned around he'd have his worried face, the one he makes when he's feeling fatherly.

"Soon it will just be the two of us," he said. "We have to talk about the future."

I turned on the hot water, watched the steam fog up the window until we both disappeared.

## §

I was dreaming. Same one I have every night: Sergio is falling, but this time Jess and I catch him.

"Abby, wake up." Darlene was shaking my shoulder.

I jumped. "Mom. Is she . . ."

"She's okay, darlin'. But she's asking for you. Says she wants to talk."

“Talk?” I looked over at the clock. Three forty.

“I know. It’s the meds. She doesn’t know what time it is anymore.”

I pulled on a sweatshirt, walked down the hallway to Mom’s room. She had an extra pillow under her head, sort of halfway between sitting up and lying down. I crawled into bed next to her and took her hands in mine, mostly to stop her from clawing at the blanket. The nurses said it’s normal, this disorientation, but it gave me the creeps.

“Abby,” she said. “I want you to . . .” She stopped talking. Stared at the wall.

“Mom? You want me to what?”

“Oh, yeah.” She shook her head and laughed. The medication made her goofy. “The cranes,” she said, “finish them.”

“You want me to finish the cranes?”

“I want your wish.”

“You know about that?”

“Of course. I’m your mother.”

“Okay. What’s your wish?”

She leaned her head on my shoulder. “I want you to believe.”

“In what?”

She was asleep.

“Mom?”

I could feel all the sad I'd been holding inside gush out. Darlene handed me tissues. Just let me cry.

“You okay, sweetie?”

I shook my head.

“I'm afraid.”

“What are you afraid of, darlin'?”

“I won't know what to do.”

“About what?”

“Everything.”

“Oh, honey. We all feel that way from time to time.”

She handed me another tissue.

“Your mama's a fine woman and I'm positive . . .” She said positive like it was capital letters. “. . . that she raised you just right. You'll know what to do. You'll know 'zactly what to do.”

## §

Mom died. We stood on a hill in the cemetery, one thousand cranes swaying in the trees while Father Mike spoke about the hereafter.

Penny and Daphne moved into the house with Dad. Jess is off riding the rodeo circuit. He sends postcards from each new city and I push a pin in the map over my desk. I saw Sergio yesterday. He's in rehab. Still wobbling around on crutches, but he looks good, and he's going to be okay. I told him I'm leaving soon, for college, and he winked at me.

The faithful, all those Our Lady freaks are still coming around. They bring flowers and candles, cross themselves and pray. Sometimes I go there late at night. I stand in the parking lot and stare up at the window. At the miracle Jess created. It looks different in the dark. More real. Like maybe if I stand there long enough, I can find something to believe.

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