

CODE BLACK

Lisa Norris

It was a hot Saturday—July. Cars poured out of Seattle on I-90, carrying bikes and backpacks, coolers and dogs east toward the mountains. Aiden squirmed in the back seat. He fiddled with his Star Trek sippy cup, pretending it was a walkie talkie. “Hello, hello.”

“Hello.” In the rearview mirror, I could see him grin under the ball cap. “Heading up the mountain now, sir,” I said. “Soon we’ll be in the trees.”

“Will there be any brontosaurus?”

“Negative.” I passed a semi chugging up the grade as the clouds thinned and the rocky outcroppings at the tops of the peaks appeared. “Only T-Rex.”

“I’ve got my laser gun.”

“All right, sir. I’ll be right behind you, sir.” We pulled off onto the exit, then drove a couple miles on a gravel road to the paved parking lot at Hidden Pond. I didn’t stop close to the parking lot because there were too many people

and too much goose poop for Aiden to get into—but there would have been more eyes to watch him, too.

A little detour was nothing for me. I was a serious hiker then. I used to do 3,000 feet in three miles with Drew, my husband of less than a year. We'd go trail running, too, especially before he went into Basic Training. The first time we tried running up Mount Si with its 3,000-foot climb, I got dehydrated and threw up, but after that, I knew what to do, how to sip water along the way and take breaks. Drew liked to say that to survive, you have to learn how to suffer, so we trained in the woods, and we suffered, all right, in rain, snow and sunshine. That's why going deeper into the woods by the pond that day was okay with me, and little Aiden was a champ. He had the energy of a zillion light bulbs, his mom used to say. He rarely whined or complained, as long as there was action.

We made our way past the geese, past dogs tethered to picnic tables, guys standing around with their beers, kids throwing rocks in the water. Aiden put up with the long way around because I told him there were cooler things to find on the other side. Sometimes I'd drop a coin and let him find it, tell him it was good luck. He was young enough, almost six, that he believed. I think

about that still, the way his face went all big-eyed and mouth open when he discovered something new.

That day, like every day since he'd left, I was trying not to think about Drew in Iraq. It wasn't as bad when I was busy with my classes or babysitting, but at night in our apartment where I lived with sleek black Mr. Cat, I'd get stuck watching episode after episode of some dumb thing on Netflix just because the characters kept showing up. If Drew had been home, we'd have fallen into bed earlier, had sex maybe, and conked out, after a good run and a late dinner. But without him, during dinner, I didn't know what to do, so I turned on the TV and let it play until I fell asleep.

On the path, Aiden was a good little elf who distracted me under the big trees. He liked to hide in the brush—I'd pretend I didn't see him, couldn't find him—then he'd jump out and scare me. Sometimes he'd forget to do it, because he got busy looking at snails or whatever in the dirt. His dad was a lab tech at the hospital, his mom did mammograms, and I think he had some of those scientist genes. When he got tired of waiting for me, he'd stand up to toss a pine cone, boy style, aiming for a tree trunk or a squirrel or sometimes for me.

Aiden's parents had given me permission—written permission, just in case, and a note about medical insurance, too—to take their kid up into the

mountains. We were going to have a picnic supper: I'd brought kid food—PB&J sandwiches, grapes and carrot sticks, goldfish and Oreos, with juice in boxes to wash it all down. That way, the parents would get to go to dinner all by themselves. Sure, the not-thinking about Drew in Iraq was something that threatened to swallow any good time, but it was nice to be out of the city. I carried my cell phone, but was not-thinking about Drew as usual and not-expecting to hear from him because I doubted I'd get a signal on that trail surrounded by mountains. But then, right where the trail bends by the big Douglas fir with the initials MD + XS, I heard the chimes go off.

I wouldn't have answered for just anyone, and I wouldn't have just stood there while Aiden kept going, but I thought if I moved, I'd lose the call. What if Drew had been injured? What if a buddy had gone down and he was freaking out? I could practically hear the gunfire.

"Babe," Drew said, "Cynthia," and I felt my throat clot when he sounded so close by and whole, not like a guy with legs blown off, as I'd feared. "I'm okay."

That was what he always said first thing, every time he called, so I'd know he wasn't calling to say his last words.

I breathed. Drew breathed. It was enough, though he was a world away in his combat boots and fatigues, lean and tall, with that goofy crew-cut showing the left ear that stuck out at a funny angle. When he felt something deeply, Drew wouldn't talk about it. We'd fought about it early on: I'd ask if he loved me, and he'd say if I couldn't tell by the way he acted, then we had no business being together. He wouldn't say it. Once we decided to get married, it didn't seem as important—I understood him by then.

On the phone he told me a weird thing had happened. "I found a horn in a building we blew up." I tried not to think about whether it was a school band room in that building, whether they'd turned a bunch of kids and teachers to rubble, too. I doubted it; that would've shown up on the news, right? And for sure I wouldn't ask, but it was strange to think of Drew's mouth in the same place that some possibly dead Iraqi kid's had been once. "So now I can play. I can keep the embouchure up." Drew was into jazz. We'd both been in the marching band, too. I was clarinet, but I didn't practice like he did with the trumpet; I didn't have that kind of focus.

"That is weird. And great." I didn't know what I was looking at then—sunlight through the trees or my boots on my feet or some perv walking by looking for an unaccompanied kid. It was all the same to me. That voice in my

ear was everything. I concentrated on saying what I thought Drew needed to hear, on sounding like he needed me to sound, which meant making the thickness in my throat dissolve. Not easy. I said I was good, I was strong, and then I talked about my stupid accounting classes and Mr. Cat who kept pawing me awake in the night and how far I'd run out on the bike path and so on.

Drew coughed. "Dust city here."

"What else?"

He couldn't tell me much. He was in Special Ops, and they weren't allowed to give details. He'd had to kill people. I knew that and just hoped it was from a distance—better *them* than *him*. I'd had a military dad, too: Navy. Navy was different, especially from the air. My dad was a pilot in Vietnam, still alive but dying slowly of emphysema. Being in the military was a service to the country, so we believed, and some people who were willing to do it were brave and generous, while others were just plain out of options. We knew that invading Iraq was complicated, and the reasons Drew and everyone else were there—those reasons were suspect. But that was up to the politicians and not the soldiers. We liked to think of American soldiers, wherever they were, like antibiotics fighting whatever diseases interfered with freedom. You had to be careful with antibiotics, of course. They could kill the good bacteria in your

gut, stuff you really needed, endangering your life, while they were saving you from other stuff.

"I'd love to be on that trail." The longing in Drew's voice made me sadder. "Tell me about it."

That's when I realized the needled path shaded by tall firs was empty. No Aiden. "I'm going to move, babe," I said to Drew then. "I don't want to lose you, but I have to keep up with the little man."

"You won't lose me." We both knew he didn't just mean on the cell phone. "I have to go anyway. Other guys are lining up here. I just wanted you to know I'm fine."

The light on the water shifted then. It was a shade of turquoise I'll never forget—unreal, like something in a painting. Sunlight filtered down onto the forest floor, through the branches of what Drew and I liked to call Christmas trees. The sunlight turned the path golden. That was magic: it meant Drew was all right, Drew was going to make it, we were going to be okay. He'd be home in a month. He'd be practicing his trumpet in the living room again, driving me crazy. "I'm sending the smell of the pines," I told him. "Wet earth and worms and fungus and ferns. You take care. You stay safe. I love you."

"Love you, too."

When the other guys were listening, he never said, "I."

No tears until after I heard the call disconnect. I kept them back by looking at that pond. No bawling when I heard his voice, especially when he said my name, *Cynthia*, *Cyn-baby*, and that wasn't easy. That ought to count for something.

Then I was back in nanny mode. I figured Aiden was hiding again, or maybe just around the bend, so I sprinted ahead, but I didn't see him. I called his name. No response. Searched in the usual kinds of places where he'd crouch down behind a log or a rock.

Down the steep slope to the pond, the water looked dark, green at the edges and in some places pitch black. I scabbled down the bank to look for anything, any sign of disturbance, in the water, but all I saw were the paddling geese. Fuzzy little goslings trailed after one of the grown-ups which gave soft little honks. One of the babies lagged a bit. On the shore, a handsome pair of boxer dogs strained against their leashes, wanting to chase from shore, and I shouted to the owner, a beefy guy in a ball cap, to please let me know if he saw a kid, and his face went from peaceful to worried.

Then I sprinted back up, grabbing tree trunks and bushes so I didn't slide backward, and on the trail, I asked everyone if they'd seen this kid in a blue

ball cap and red shorts. One freckle-faced girl wearing gym shorts and a CWU T-shirt with the snarling head of a wildcat on the front remembered seeing us just before Aiden went AWOL. Later, this would help to clear me of suspicion. "The cute little guy playing hide 'n seek?" She smiled. "I guess he's winning."

I got her and a half dozen other people to join the search. The brush was thick. It would have been easy for a kid to lose his bearings, but I hadn't been on the phone all that long. I went back and forth, off-trail now, then over to the pond, scared to death someone would find him in the water. A skinny guy in shorts with a chain tattooed around one bicep waded around and dove under the surface. I was a decent swimmer, but I couldn't do it, too afraid of what I might find.

Finally, a sweet-faced lady with big worried eyes and a golden retriever pup on a leash said she thought I should call 911. She was volunteer Search and Rescue, she said, and her pup would be, too, when he was older. She said the first bit of time after a kid went missing was crucial. So I went back to where I'd been talking to Drew and made the call.

§

The deputy's crew-cut bristled under his broad-brimmed hat. He wore a star on his chest just like in the old movies. On that bench by the pond, as I

answered his questions, my legs were cement. I thought they should just throw me in, let me sink down in the silty water to rest in the soft goeey stuff at the bottom, because what if Aiden were there right now?

The deputy was all "When did you last see him?" and "Who was the last person you saw before you got on the phone?" and "Which way were you facing then?" I tried to answer, but I was thinking *Drew Drew Drew* because he always had my back. He paid the bills and washed the windshield when we got gas and knew where my glasses were when I couldn't find them. As the eldest, and with an ex-Marine Vietnam vet dad who was screwed up from Agent Orange, Drew had grown up taking responsibility for everybody while I was an only child—first my parents' kid and then Drew's baby: *Cyn-baby*.

But my mind was gone, and I was hyperventilating, so the deputy put a hand on my shoulder. I was dripping with sweat, and my mouth was sandpaper. I wanted to vomit. The highway was close. If somebody'd snatched him up, they could have sped off and would be miles away by now. How fast could somebody run back through the brush, off the trail, and stuff him into their car?

"Just put your head between your knees and breathe." The deputy patted me like I was a pony, pat-stroke, pat-stroke on my back.

Finally I could talk, and as I did, he wrote a list of people I remembered: a jogging girl with a blonde ponytail and Nirvana T-shirt, a skinny old man with a toy poodle, a fat couple I saw only from the back, standing on the shore smoking cigarettes. There were some boys swinging out over the pond on the rope that hung from a tree branch and a fat Latina lady in pink sweats—wait, it was too hot for sweats—that was weird—so maybe her? I described all of them and more for the deputy. Gonzalez was his name, though he didn't look Mexican. He had dark hair but blue eyes. For a minute, I thought maybe he was Pink Sweats Lady's accomplice. Then I realized that was insane.

After a while, here came Search and Rescue with their bright orange vests, radios crackling, and a couple of tracker dogs.

And I thought *they'll find him. They'll put out an Amber Alert and get him back. Or maybe he's playing hide and seek and watching all this commotion right now from under a bush. Or maybe somebody found him up the trail and took him to get some ice cream before they went to the sheriff's office which, after all, is a bit of a drive from here.*

But several hours went by and no Aiden.

Rodriguez came back, herding me away from the Search and Rescue van. "It's better if you go home." He gestured toward Aiden's parents, who'd arrived

when I was out on the trail, both still in their lab coats from the hospital. Mike, a muscular little guy with a red goatee, clenched his fists as he walked toward me. Greta, petite, high-cheekboned, with a brunette bob and colorful balloons printed on her scrubs, couldn't look at me at all.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Mike moved as if to strike, but the deputy stepped between us, and Greta grabbed his arm.

"Mike, stop it. We need to focus. We just need to find him." She kept her gaze toward the woods. "We'll deal with her later."

"I'm so sorry." I felt flattened, and my nerves jangled. I'd been hiking and shouting until I was hoarse. I'd just come back to the rescue van to be sure nobody else had found Aiden while I was gone. "I deserve whatever you want to do," I said to Mike's angry face, Greta's averted head. "I got distracted. My boyfriend called. He's in Iraq, you know. He doesn't get to call that often. But it doesn't matter now. It has nothing to do with—but it's why I looked away. I just can't believe he disappeared like that. I just can't believe he isn't hiding behind some tree."

Greta started out toward the trail. "I'll get out there and call him. He just needs to hear my voice."

But Mike wasn't backing down. He shook a fist at the deputy. When he spoke, spittle flew from his wet lips. "You put her in handcuffs. You take her to jail."

The deputy nodded, took my arm, and pointed Aiden's parents toward a Search and Rescue worker who was holding a clipboard. "That lady over there can give you updates on the search. I'll take care of Cynthia." He led me over to his squad car, out of their hearing, where he shook his head sadly. "I don't see any reason to arrest you at this point, but you better stay close to your phone. You're a person of interest in this investigation. We need to be in touch." His hand grazed the pistol on his hip, probably a habit. "At least the little boy wasn't found in the pond. Given the time frame, I don't think he got lost, either." He took off his hat and ran a hand over his bristly head, looking over my head toward the highway. "He may have been taken."

This was already on my mind, of course, but no one had said it out loud, and when I heard the words, I felt my mind shut down. I wasn't going to believe it. Aiden was just hiding in a hollow tree, enjoying the game, laughing at us.

The deputy's walkie-talkie crackled, and he was about to go, but I made him wait until I got Aiden's lunchbox with its happy blue dinosaur out of my

car. I gave it to Rodriguez. "Here. When you find him, he'll need something to eat."

§

Marigolds and pansies bloomed in the flowerbeds under the lights at my apartment complex. I wanted to yank them out of the ground. I rode the elevator to the fourth floor and put the key in my door. I was so distracted that I opened the door too wide, and Mr. Cat ran out. My neighbor, a teacher type in a headband and sweats, with two black pugs, was fumbling with her door across the hall as well as hanging onto her dogs by their leashes. The dogs pulled loose and ran at the cat, which leaped up a ladder in the hallway underneath a section of ceiling that had been taken down. He crawled into the darkness among the pipes and electrical wires. It took me two hours to get him down.

I couldn't call Drew, of course; he had to call me. I had parents who'd freak out. They'd retired in Norfolk, Virginia, where we'd lived when I was elementary school age. What could they do, anyway? I didn't have close girlfriends because I'd spent all my time with Drew or working or going to school, so it was just me and Mr. Cat and my accounting books. Anyway, it wasn't the kind

of thing you wanted people to know. You really didn't want people to think of you forever as the babysitter who lost the kid.

But when they didn't find Aiden for a whole day and night, and then 48 hours, 72, I thought I'd better tell someone in case they took me to jail. So, I called my folks.

Right away, Dad turned on the speakerphone to see if I could hear the seagulls. He'd been throwing them crusts of bread on the balcony overlooking the Chesapeake Bay. They could see the 17-mile long bridge-tunnel that included a couple of mile-long underwater spans. When I was a kid, I used to try to hold my breath in the tunnels, figuring I'd practice surviving just in case the thing collapsed. The air in my lungs would go stale as I watched the backs of my parents' heads, and the radio would crackle with stati—nothing could be received under there.

Now, Dad would be hooked up to his oxygen tank, sitting in his shorts and Hawaiian shirt. He'd beckon to Mom, who'd hurry out the sliding glass door in her sundress and bare feet, toenails a bright pink.

After Mom's little gasp and then a silence as they took it all in, Dad asked, "How long did you take your eyes off him?"

"She was just trying to support her soldier." My mother's voice broke. "Being there for Drew."

But Dad was the kind of guy who'd take a penny off my allowance for every weed he found that I didn't pull. "How long were you on the phone?"

"Seven minutes. The phone log says seven minutes."

"I left you that long sometimes when I went in to get groceries," Mom said. "Locked you in the car and told you to stay put."

"Maybe this kid wasn't as well trained as Cynthia."

"There weren't so many predators then," my mother said. "We didn't have to be so careful."

Dad started, "A person should *always*—"

"I would have done the same thing." Mom's voice was defensive. "Supported my man." She hesitated a moment, and when Dad didn't say anything else, she added, "You tell us what you need. We're here."

§

A couple weeks later, I was studying in Jumpin' Java on campus because what else could I do but go on with my life? I had my phone with me constantly. I kept a notebook to write down anything, any tiny detail, that I remembered—like the color of Aiden's shoes or the candy wrapper I'd seen on

the trail. I kept going to class as usual, even though I carried the absence of Aiden around inside me like unexploded ordinance. Then Drew called.

"I'm okay," Drew said, as usual, and I remembered that the last time he'd said that, Aiden had been okay, too.

"I'm not." I stuffed my books in my backpack and went outside, where I wouldn't be heard.

Under the trees, as I watched the cars go by, I told him what had happened, except, to spare him, I said I'd been on the phone with my mom, not him. She wasn't feeling well, I said, so I was distracted. I worried that maybe she was having heart problems again.

"Your mom," he said. "You were talking to your mom." And I knew he knew it wasn't Mom but him.

"It's fucked up." His voice sounded tired. "Stuff happens—stuff you never think you could do or survive. Me and DeShawn, this buddy of mine, we call Code Black."

"Code Black?"

"It means off limits. Not going there. You and I can call Code Black on this. We've both been part of something. Now you get it. We don't have to talk about it. They'll find him."

"They'll find him?"

"Right," he said. "Keep the faith."

"Keep the faith."

"Right."

"You have to come home."

"Soon. You be strong. You believe. They'll find him." Then he was gone, and I was left to look at my reflection in the window of the accounting building—a ponytailed girl in baggy shorts and a T-shirt, like any ordinary college student.

§

I'm not sure how I got through the next month. It was just one day after another while I did what I had to do, but sometimes I'd look up, and nothing seemed familiar. I didn't know where I was, even if I'd been there a hundred times. There was this panic, a tightness in the chest, like I couldn't breathe as I looked out at the passing cars. Did any of them belong to the person who'd taken Aiden? I'd stand against the nearest building until I could get my bearings again, working to steady the pace of my heart.

Meanwhile, Aiden's parents decided not to press charges; the deputy didn't think they had a case. He was, he said to me, to Mike and Greta, to the media, as sure as he could be that Aiden had been abducted.

I didn't let myself think about the kind of person who would do that. I wouldn't let myself consider what such a person might want. I avoided anything—TV, movies, radio shows—that had to do with missing kids.

Then Drew came home. At the base the day he arrived, there was the whole reunion scene with his mom and brothers and sister, everybody hugging and crying and commenting on this skinnier version of Drew with the leathery body and the look that said *I'm here-but-not-here*. We knew not to overdo it, so everyone scattered while I took Drew back to the apartment. Mr. Cat rubbed up against him, and then Drew caved a little and teared up. I had his trumpet shined up in the middle of the kitchen table under a WELCOME HOME sign, and he blew on it, letting his fingers move the keys. *Stormy Weather* is what he played first.

It wasn't until a couple days later, after a run, that he opened up. His face had red splotches from the exertion. Sweat dripped from his scalp as we walked on the little path that cut through a park in our neighborhood. He said he didn't have it as bad as some. One platoon had a leader offering four-day passes

to anyone who stabbed an Iraqi to death. At least, Drew said, his own CO had been a decent guy. One of his buds, though, had shot into a group of Iraqis running away and killed a little girl. "That guy was really messed up," Drew said. "All he could talk about was the barrette in her hair. He was useless after that."

Drew said he'd had to do things he wasn't proud of. He'd followed orders so he could be honorably discharged. When he said "honorably," he made a pffffing sound and shook his head. He wouldn't go into it with me. He Code Blacked it. He said he didn't want me to think about him in conjunction with the things he'd had to do in the line of duty. *Conjunction*. That was his word. He said he'd lost people he cared about, but what was done was done, things changed, shit happened, and you just had to go with the flow. He said people who didn't go with the flow got drowned, and when he said that, I thought of the younger me holding my breath in those long, dark tunnels in the Chesapeake Bay.

At least Drew still had all his parts, including the ear that stuck out. That was something. He still loved what he'd loved before—the trumpet and me. He couldn't sleep that well, it was true, but we were lucky.

One day soon after he got home, I said, "Let's just lie down. Let's just snuggle for a bit." Then, before we could really get intimate, my mom called. She did that once a week to see how I was doing, especially how I was doing with "it," as she called Aiden's disappearance. Dad only got on once in a while, but he was on that time, talking about the condo association, how they didn't take care of the grounds. "The weeds are going crazy," he said. "I could spend the rest of my life cleaning up the flowerbeds. They really need to make an effort. They're going to lose people."

Into the phone, to my mother, I said we had to go, we had something we were going to miss. Then Drew and I undressed each other. We were awkward, like the first time, but we made it work. And Drew was quiet after, really quiet, so I knew it was intense for him, though I wasn't sure that was good.

Later, when he caught me looking at stuff posted about Aiden on Facebook, including comments like, *What kind of idiot nanny lets a perv take a kid?*, Drew wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand like he was going to be sick. He shook his head and pulled me tight to his chest. I felt rigid, undeserving. But he kept holding me. We sat that way for a long time, like you do when you have no idea which way to move. I remember staring at our beige carpet, thinking how dirty it was.

After that, he made me get off Facebook.

§

We used "Code Black" whenever one of us brought up something the other didn't want to go into. Drew's mom's cancer when it moved to Stage 4, the screw-up at work when I put some numbers in the wrong column and got myself laid off. Not fired, my boss Linda said, because everyone makes mistakes, and it wasn't the end of the world, but when it came time for layoffs, I was the first. Drew said "Code Black" really fast whenever I wondered aloud about Aiden. On the sixth anniversary of Aiden's disappearance, we'd still heard nothing, no news at all, about him. They had no leads.

Early on, I wrote an apology to Greta and Mike and made regular, anonymous donations to Aiden's missing kid fund, but the only time I heard from them was a couple weeks after he went missing. Greta called me, wanting to know what he said that day, whether he'd eaten anything or asked about his parents. Was he happy? Did he seem scared?

"He was happy," I told her.

"What was the last thing you said to him?"

"He showed me a glittery rock. He said it could be kryptonite. It could kill Superman. So I told him to throw it in the pond, and he did. After that, he ran down the trail. He was singing. Then the phone rang."

"I wish you hadn't given away that lunchbox," she said. "I wish I had that at least."

I felt hopeful for a moment, as if I might be able to recover something for her. "Do you want me to call the sheriff's office for you?"

"I tried that."

"Oh." I could hear her breathing. "Please let me help if you think of a way."

"All right." But she never called again.

§

Finally Drew got out of the Marines. It was an easy decision but he had to serve out the terms of his contract—four years active, four years reserve. He said after he saw people disappear in the space of time you'd turn your head to laugh at a joke, he wasn't going to spend his life doing anything but exactly what he wanted.

"That's how you show respect," he said. "You don't take life for granted."

"So what do you want?"

"I want to play music. I can't make a living at that, so I'll take education, too. I'll teach music in high school and try to keep kids out of trouble. Try to keep them from getting fucked up like I am. Also, I want a kid of my own."

He was leaning across the kitchen table after we'd had a few glasses of wine. He'd spilled some of our good cabernet on his yellow Tweety Bird T-shirt. "I really want something—you know, like, some part of me—to keep on."

I didn't say yes. Right then I couldn't outright deceive him.

"Just because we don't know where he is—look," he took my hand, "you still deserve to be a mom."

"I know that," I said, but I didn't. Even at work these many months later, I'd be putting the numbers for one thing in a spreadsheet, and then, something would happen, like a picture of a forest would come up on my screen saver, and the numbers would creep into the wrong column somehow. It was worse if somebody was watching me. When I got nervous, I was sure I'd lose track, and so I did.

"I can get through school in a couple years. They say teachers are going to be needed. I bet I can find work right here. If we have a kid while I'm in school, my hours will be more flexible." He took my hand, and I flashed on Aiden

doing the same thing, his little fingers. I felt a sharp squeeze in the chest and let out a sound like I'd been hurt.

Drew gave me a hard look. "You can do this. I know you can."

"It's like you're asking me to jump off a cliff."

"I'll watch your back, Cynthia. I can do that."

"But who'll watch the baby's?"

His mouth tightened. "Other guys—even the ones who got out—are going back, working for contractors. Scott, Mark, even Pauley. He said he'd never do that to his family again. The money's good. They can make a ton and do what they trained for and...look." He shook his head. "I'm *trying* not to do that. I *need* something to keep me here. On track. Some kind of anchor."

My body felt like a big metal bell someone had just hit. His words were like some huge mallet, so I crossed my arms and hugged myself, trying to stop the vibrations. "Don't go back. Don't do that."

He pulled me over to the couch and put his arm around me. "If people who screwed up stopped having kids, there wouldn't be any more humans. There's no reason we shouldn't do what everybody else does."

"Everybody else hasn't—"

"Code Black." Drew held me so I couldn't move. "Let's balance it out. Let's bring something good into the world."

I didn't say no, but I didn't say yes, either. I let him keep me in a tight embrace.

§

Another accounting firm hired me after my layoff, since the old boss had been nice enough to write me a good letter. People can be good like that sometimes, even if it's a white lie. When they are, they keep other people afloat. I appreciate that. I was getting dressed for work, standing there in my underwear when Drew found the birth control pills on the bathroom counter. I was holding my slacks on a hanger, and I dropped them when I saw Drew standing with the package in his hand.

Since his return, Drew had been waking up with nightmares after he flailed around in bed. I could feel them coming on because he'd start grinding his teeth first, and I knew to move to the couch before he started whipping around, pulling off the blankets. Though his eyes were open now, the way he looked made me feel like I did when he was having one of those dreams. "I thought we were making a baby," he said.

I knelt to pick up the things I'd dropped.

He banged a fist against the door frame. "Every time we made love, you were telling me a fucking lie?"

I retreated into the bedroom, where I put one leg into my pants and then the other. I pulled my blouse over my head, then went hunting for my shoes. The bus would be at the stop in 5 minutes. They were strict about working hours. They'd fired another new girl who'd only been late twice, once because she was in a fender bender. So the gossip went.

Drew didn't come out of the bathroom. Through the half-open door, I could see him sitting on the closed toilet, head in his hands. His silence was like the kind in one of those movies where the camera's herky jerky in a forest behind some girl, and you know something's going to grab her. But I got out the door before he did.

§

At home later that night, Drew wasn't there on time. I didn't know whether to feel panic or relief. His rehearsal had probably just run late, and it was rush hour. Normally he'd call. I just hoped he hadn't been in an accident.

In the bathroom, I found the pills exactly where he'd left them. I picked them up and considered all the late nights I'd slipped one into my mouth after Drew went to bed.

I'd been keeping them hidden in a cosmetic bag under the sink, where I knew he'd never look. Maybe I'd been half-asleep when I'd left them out the night before, or maybe I'd just felt the weight of deception getting too heavy. If he thought of having a kid after he'd seen people blown apart, shouldn't he get to do that?

But what about me? Aiden was still there every time I ran in the woods. He was hiding in the brush about to jump out at me whenever I rounded a curve. His bones were lying under the fallen logs, waiting for some dog to dig them up. And that was my fault.

If Drew needed a baby that badly, and I couldn't do it for him, maybe I deserved to lose him, too, because when I imagined holding a baby in my arms, it was all *Code Black, Code Black*. I held the birth control pills in my hand and wished they were another kind—the kind that could make the past go away. If I couldn't do that, maybe I could just flush them down the john. I stood that way for a long time. Pills or Drew. Drew or pills. That was my thinking. And if there were no Drew, I didn't know if there'd be a me. Everything in my body—calves, thighs, back, neck, jaw—felt like cement. Like when I was sitting on that bench unable to talk to the deputy, my thoughts gone inside the static of his radio.

As I stood there, the phone rang. I took it out of my pocket. Unrecognizable number. 1-888. Probably a sales call. Randomly generated. I put the pills back in the cosmetic bag. I didn't throw them away.

Drew came home and failed to kiss me. Silently, he put his things in the closet and shredded some lettuce for a salad. We chewed our pizza. My slice was a slab of greasy cardboard, hard to swallow. Drew's hair had grown to his chin by now; I could no longer see the wayward ear. He'd grown a patchy beard and wore a grey hoody and jeans.

"How was traffic?" I asked.

Drew took a gulp of his beer. "Terrible."

"You didn't call."

He shrugged.

"I was worried."

He looked at his plate. "Did you want me home safely, or did you want to lose me?" He stared at his plate.

"What do you mean?"

He set his jaw. "You know what happens when people are on the phone. They don't pay attention. They have accidents."

I closed my eyes. "Code Black."

"You took the pills. You did what you had to do. I'm no one to judge." He got up from the table. "I'm going to watch the Seahawks."

So we didn't talk about it and didn't talk about it. A couple weeks later, I stood behind him while he bent over the sink in his sweats and no shirt, showing the pale scar on his back where he'd cut himself falling on a rock when he was a kid. It made him seem vulnerable, and the hard knot of fear in my gut gave way. Here was a man who, despite whatever wounds he'd sustained on the inside, was like any man who had to attend to his personal hygiene. His mouth was full of foam from brushing his teeth. All he wanted was this human thing, to procreate. Maybe I could do that. Maybe I, too, could be ordinary.

I went into the cabinet for the cosmetic bag. I took out the pills, held them in front of his face. "All right," I said. I tossed them into the garbage.

Drew wiped his mouth. "Don't do it for me. Do it because you want to, because you deserve it."

Standing there between the shower and the john, I closed my eyes. In that second, I imagined myself running into Aidan's mom Greta in the grocery store after I had my own baby in my cart. She would look into the baby carrier first, her face blank and distracted, and then up at me. When she understood

who I was, her face would go red, eyes distended, mouth opened in an ugly twist.

But when I opened my eyes, there was Drew again, wiping at his mouth with a towel. It was Saturday, our day to go run on the trail, because like Drew said, to survive, you had to learn how to suffer. We'd been training together like that for a long time. "I don't know what anybody deserves," I said. I looked at the pills but didn't pull them out of the trash. Instead, I tossed him his T-shirt and tightened the laces on my running shoes. "But if we're going to push ourselves, we'd better get going."

Drew pulled me into an embrace—he smelled of wintermint.

Lisa Norris has published two prize-winning story collections, *Women Who Sleep With Animals* (Stephen F. Austin University Press Prize, 2011) and *Toy Guns* (Helicon Nine Press, 2000). Her stories, poems and creative nonfiction have been published in various literary journals—e.g., *Terrain.org*, *Shenandoah*, *Fourth Genre*, *Ascent*, an anthology called *Kiss Tomorrow Hello* (Doubleday 2006), and others. She taught for 15 years at Virginia Tech and now is a professor at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, WA.