

KNOWING

David C. Metz

Few people came to Brenda's house after the funeral, and most didn't stay long. By nine o'clock only Janet remained. She and Brenda sat at the kitchen table sharing a pack of cigarettes and a second bottle of white wine, which one of them stood to retrieve from the refrigerator whenever their glasses were low.

"Why would she say that? I mean, Jesus, why say something like that?" Brenda tapped her cigarette against the side of a cut-glass ashtray the color of ginger ale.

"Did she say it to you?" Janet asked.

Brenda shook her head. "No, I was going outside to smoke and I heard her talking to some people from work. 'What an angry way to die.' Like she's some kind of goddamn suicide expert."

“Well, that’s just Pam, you know, she always has to have something to say.”

Brenda nodded and exhaled, the smoke curling up towards the three-pronged overhead fixture casting harsh light onto the laminate tabletop. The house was otherwise dark except for the front porch light, which Rick switched on before he went to bed. He had been sitting with them earlier, drinking beer, his eyes shifting from one to the other as if he were watching their conversation as much as listening to it. Without a word, he’d slid out of his chair, bent on one knee and wrapped Brenda in his arms, mashing her head against his chest. Then he kissed her on the forehead. His red-rimmed eyes glistened in the stark light.

“Try to sleep,” Brenda told him.

“How’s he doing?” Janet asked after he’d disappeared into the darkened house.

“He blames himself.”

Janet nodded and sipped her wine. She traced her finger along a hairline scratch on the table.

“What?” Brenda asked.

Janet looked at her. “I was just thinking how he must feel.”

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“I know,” Janet said.

“But it was his gun.” Brenda shook her head. “That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it? That’s what everybody’s thinking, right?”

“I don’t know what everybody’s thinking.”

“But here’s the thing, Janet. Here’s the thing.” Brenda smiled like someone with the answer to a riddle. “I’m the one who let him bring it into the house.”

The gun was from the time Rick did long haul driving. He’d often slept in the cab of his truck and having the pistol made him feel safer. That’s what he told Brenda. He was off the road by the time they met seven years ago, an assistant manager in an auto parts store, but he’d kept the gun. He told her he was used to having it. Brenda loved the deep calm of his voice, the strength of his hand cupping her shoulder when he put his arm around her, and the gentle way he played with Melanie. When he said he would keep it in a locked metal box on the top shelf in the bedroom closet, Brenda agreed the gun could stay.

The police said Melanie must have found the key to the metal box in the back of the top dresser drawer where Rick hid it under balled pairs of socks. She knew about the metal box and the gun because Rick showed her when she turned thirteen.

“She needs to know it’s not a toy,” he’d said to Brenda. “She’s old enough to understand. I’d rather show her than have her come across it by accident.” He spoke in the calm and measured way he had, the way that made her feel safe.

Brenda and Janet sat at the kitchen table past midnight, until Brenda suddenly felt the weight of the day and the wine. When she thought again of stepping onto the wide, wraparound porch of the funeral home and overhearing Pam, grief rose in her like nausea. It was an angry way to die.

§

“I missed something,” Brenda said to Rick. They were sitting on lawn chairs in the backyard where Rick had coaxed her to come after he found her curled on Melanie’s bed when he got home from work. She looked straight ahead as she spoke, staring at the pink and blue hues of the sunset. Rick sipped his beer.

“I don’t know what. But she was only fifteen. There had to be something.”

She felt Rick’s hand on her thigh and turned to him.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself,” he said. He was tall and round-shouldered, with an angular face and hazel eyes that blinked as he leaned closer.

“You did the best you could with her.”

“Not good enough.” She felt her eyes sting and looked away, taking a sip of her iced tea. When she looked at him again she gripped his hand. “Sorry.”

“No need.”

“I just feel like there has to be a reason. There does, doesn’t there?”

Rick shook his head. “I don’t know. I guess.” He sat back in his chair, gently withdrawing his hand from hers and rubbing his eyes. “One thing I learned from all those years on the road is life can be fucked up.”

“What do you mean, like it just happened? Some random act?”

“No, no,” he said, the pitch of his voice rising. “Just that bad things some-time happen.”

Brenda wanted the deep calm to return to his voice, wished they were on the sofa so she could lean into him and be held. She smiled and rubbed his arm as he slouched in his chair, head tilted back to look at the first evening stars.

“My mother wanted me to give Melanie up for adoption, did I ever tell you that?”

Rick shook his head. Brenda sat back in her chair. Across the street that flanked the backyard was a small municipal park. There wasn’t much to it: a couple of swing sets, monkey bars, and a slide, an open field with the metal frame of soccer goals on each end. But it was a place to play and one of the

reasons she'd rented the house. She'd taken Melanie there on spring and summer evenings when there was still light after she got home from work, and on Saturday mornings when she'd bring a mug of coffee and sit on the bench next to the swings. She'd watched Melanie lean back in the swing and pump her legs the way Brenda had taught her, propelling herself forward and back, hair streaming behind her, smiling as she picked up speed, lifting higher, glancing at Brenda to be sure she was watching.

"Maybe I should have. Maybe she'd be alive if I had."

"Don't say that."

Brenda shrugged. "Who knows? She might have done better in a normal family."

Rick sat up.

"I'm sorry," Brenda said, "I didn't mean...I was just thinking about all the time before we met."

Rick took a long pull of beer. "I loved her too, you know."

Melanie had not been a deal-breaker for Rick, like she had been for most men Brenda dated. He said family was important to him. His parents were farmers in southwest Missouri, and as he put it, "bat-shit crazy Bible-thumpers." An only child, his life was restricted to school, chores, and church. He

left right after high school, eventually becoming a trucker, a job that fit his restless nature, his need to move and breathe. He worried his upbringing had taught him little about being a father. Still, he told her the idea appealed to him, the chance to do it the right way.

Brenda set her glass on the ground and held his hand in both of hers. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Everything feels so crazy. I just want to know why."

He nodded, freed his hand, went into the house.

§

When she woke the next morning, Brenda knew she had to move. She lay in bed trying to make a plan. They would have to give notice, find a new place. What else? She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then another, hands folded across her chest like a carved figure on a coffin. Melanie's ashes, she thought.

Rick was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. She kissed the top of his head before pouring herself a mug and sitting across from him.

"We have to move."

He looked at her.

She braced her arms on the table and held her coffee mug with both hands.

"I can't live here anymore."

“This house?”

“Yes.”

He nodded slowly, eyes cast downward. “We can do whatever you want, you know that. But I’ve heard it’s not a good idea to make changes right after something like this, that it’s better to wait a bit.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. It’s just what I’ve heard.”

She started to cry. He brought his chair around next to hers and held her.

“We can move whenever you want,” he said. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Rick,” she said after a moment. “We might have to leave Sangamon. I don’t know if I can stay this close.”

They stayed through the summer, three months during which Brenda felt like she was watching her life being lived. She was aware of going through each day, of seeing people at work and the grocery store and in her neighborhood. She heard herself speaking, but conversations had become collections of sounds. She and Rick spread a map of the United States on the kitchen table and looked at cities, measuring distances. Sangamon was in central Illinois which meant they could get far away going east or west. Eventually they decided on Phoenix and Rick set about finding a job there.

Each day Brenda walked to the end of the hallway to Melanie's bedroom. A stuffed elephant, faded and gray, leaned against the pillow of the neatly made bed, its black cloth eye staring at Brenda. A shelf along one wall was nearly empty except for yearbooks from middle school and high school, the first three "Harry Potter" novels and all of the "Twilight" series. The wall opposite the bookshelf was freshly painted. Some days Brenda stared at it, watched the movement of light speckled through lace curtains, until in her mind's eye she saw again the dark stain, a Rorschach splattering.

"Jesus, Melanie," she'd whisper.

§

Brenda was nineteen when she discovered she was pregnant with Melanie. She wasn't sure who the father was.

"There are many couples in need," her mother said. "They can give the baby a good life."

"I can give the baby a good life."

Her mother shook her head. "Not as good as a married couple."

They were in the living room of her parents' house, seated on opposite ends of a faded turquoise sofa. The draperies were open but the front windows

admitted scant light in late afternoon. Her mother picked at a bit of thread on one of the slip covers. "It's not easy raising a child alone."

It was a reference to Brenda's father. She remembered him sitting on the same sofa sipping his scotch and watching golf or football or just staring out the front window, as if waiting for something to pass by. One Sunday afternoon when Brenda was a high school freshman, he stood during a commercial break of a Bears-Packers game, started to cross the room, and dropped dead of a cerebral hemorrhage.

"Your father could be difficult," Brenda's mother continued, still not looking up. "I can say that to you now that you're grown. Half the time I didn't know where his mind was. But whatever his faults, he was a good provider."

"I know."

Brenda took a job as a secretary at a local insurance brokerage and when she advanced to office manager she moved to the small rambler. Melanie was three. The first night in the house she tucked Melanie in, poured a glass of wine and walked through all the rooms. She settled onto the sofa in the living room. Stillness permeated the house. There were no passing cars, no sounds coming from the neighbors' homes. She set her empty glass on the coffee table, buried her face in her hands and wept. We can be happy here, she thought.

It was just the two of them and she worried their solitude was turning Melanie inward. Her daughter did well enough in school, she had friends, but she always seemed to be on the periphery. Brenda's mother said she was just quiet, like her grandfather. She watched Melanie while Brenda worked and on the Saturday nights Brenda had a date or went out with her girlfriends. Brenda felt odd coming home to her own house and being met by her mother, as if she were still in high school.

"What?" she asked one time, slumping onto the sofa, watching her mother gather her purse and the cloth bag containing her needlepoint.

"You need to be careful."

"Jesus, mom, I have to have a life."

"You have a daughter. You can't be out drinking and whatnot until all hours."

"Whatnot?" Brenda giggled.

"You know what I mean."

Brenda nodded, closing her eyes and resting her head against the sofa. "Oh, I do know what you mean. But don't worry, Mom, there's not a lot of whatnot going on around here lately."

"Lately."

Brenda opened her eyes. She was fuzzy-headed with wine and too tired to argue, not that it would make any difference. Her mother saw only mistakes.

§

Since the funeral Janet stopped by a couple of evenings a week, and on Fridays she brought a pizza and a bottle of wine. Rick took a couple slices and a beer into the living room to watch the Cardinals, leaving Janet and Brenda at the kitchen table.

“I think she was happy here,” Brenda said. “You know?”

Janet nodded and smiled at Brenda. “Of course she was. She was a good girl, we all know that.”

“And beautiful.” Brenda fished a cigarette from the pack on the table. Melanie had luxurious raven hair and jade green eyes. She had always seemed unaware of her beauty and the power it gave her, part of her quiet nature, Brenda thought. Rick had helped to draw her out. Melanie was eight when he moved into the rambler. He crossed his eyes and twisted his long face into silly contortions, tousled her hair, took her to the park to kick a soccer ball or play catch. When he slouched on the sofa, stretching his legs onto the coffee table, Melanie sat on his lap and rested her head against his long chest, giggling at the deep rumbling sound his voice made.

Brenda lit her cigarette and looked across the table at her friend. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Of course.”

“Do you ever pray?”

Janet shrugged. “Sometimes. I think everybody does sometimes, right?”

“The only time I pray,” Brenda said, “is when I need something. Do you think that means my prayers aren’t as good as people who pray all the time?”

“I don’t know, honey. I never thought about it that way.”

“My mom used to pray all the time. I think she prayed for me. I know she prayed for Melanie.” Brenda exhaled, tapping the end of the cigarette on the lip of the ashtray. “Probably prayed to save her from me.” She smiled without parting her lips, eyes cast downward. Her mother had been a devout Catholic who saw no humor in Brenda’s description of herself as a “recovering” Catholic. “She told me I should have Melanie baptized, raise her Catholic. She used to be on me all the time about that after Melanie was born. But I couldn’t do that, Janet. You know? I mean I didn’t want to be a hypocrite. I’m not sure I believe any of that crap, not really.”

Janet nodded.

“But now I think, could it have made Melanie happy? Maybe given her something?”

“Oh, honey, you gave her everything you could. You were a good mother.”

“You really think so?”

“Oh my God, yes,” Janet replied. She blinked back tears and shook her head. “I’m sorry.” She waved her hand in front of her face as if trying to cool it. “I’m sorry,” she repeated. “It just makes me so sad.”

Brenda nodded. The wine was having an effect, her mind tumbling through random thoughts. She and Janet had played soccer in eighth grade. During team huddles, just before the game started, all the players piled their hands one on top of the other while the coach made a little speech that always ended with something corny like, “Win on three. One-two-three, win!”

“Life sucks on three,” Brenda said, a hoarse laugh bursting out of her. “Remember that?”

Janet was startled but covered it with a smile as she watched Brenda laugh, then cough, then stare across the table, gripping Janet’s hand.

“Do you really think I was a good mother, Janet? You aren’t just saying that?”

One evening in late July, Brenda asked Rick if they should have married. They were sitting in the backyard watching neighborhood kids playing soccer in the park.

“Do you want to get married?” Rick shifted in his seat, took a sip of beer.

“It doesn’t matter now. I was thinking about Melanie.”

Rick shook his head, stared at the label on his beer bottle.

“I’m not finding fault,” Brenda said. “I know you were good to her. I know that.” Melanie had never resisted Rick like she did Brenda. He had a way of coaxing her out of her bad moods, slyly teasing her until she laughed. He always tried to build her up, told her how beautiful she was, even during this past year, when she was more and more sullen. He wasn’t afraid to show his emotions, like a lot of men. Janet called him a hugger, rolling her eyes. Brenda remembered how he pulled Melanie into bear hugs, and put an arm around her shoulder when they walked over to the park to kick the soccer ball or sit on the swings and talk. They were as close as any father and daughter could be.

“I just keep thinking about what I could have done different.”

“Well maybe,” Rick turned to her, “you’re thinking too much. Maybe there isn’t an answer.” He spoke in the calm voice that had always reassured

Brenda, brow furrowed, but she could see in his eyes the struggle to mask his irritation.

“Maybe,” she said. “But I can’t help it.”

“It’s your mother. She’s still in your head from beyond the grave.” He took a long pull of beer.

“I can’t help that either.”

Her mother thought it was a mistake to allow Rick to move in unless a ring was involved. She said it was a bad example to set for Melanie and dismissed Brenda’s argument that Rick was really good with her.

“He’s a charmer,” her mother had said. “Charm is easy.”

“He’s like a father to Melanie.”

“Except he’s not.”

Brenda had little patience with her mother’s fault-finding. She spoke to her less and considered other ways of cutting her off, such as restricting the time she spent with Melanie. Ways to say the three of them—Rick, Brenda and Melanie—were a family and didn’t need her mother or her approval. Rick talked her out of it, saying she’d regret it after her mother was gone. Now she was, along with Melanie, leaving Brenda to make sense of it.

All summer Brenda tried to recall when Melanie started to slip away.

She was a good girl. Not perfect. Sometimes Brenda had to get on her. Once when she was fourteen she emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel to cross the hall to her bedroom. Brenda told her she wasn't a child anymore, she needed to wear a robe. Melanie rolled her eyes and mumbled "Whatever." Other times she had a smart mouth, but Brenda had a smart mouth when she was that age. She thought all kids did.

During the last year, something changed. Melanie was gone more and when she was home, she was moodier. Sometimes even Rick couldn't draw her out. From the kitchen window Brenda watched them walk to the park after dinner one evening and sit side by side on the park bench. She could see Rick talking, gesturing, draping an arm across Melanie's shoulders, while Melanie seemed to do little more than stare at the ground.

"I was trying to make her understand she doesn't have it so bad around here," he'd said when Brenda asked what they had been talking about. "Not like the shit box I grew up in."

"Did you say that?"

"No, of course not. But I did tell her she was lucky to have parents who loved her and cared what happened to her."

“What did she say?”

“You’re not my father.”

“What?”

“She said, ‘You’re not my father.’”

Brenda shook her head. “Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah, something’s going on with her, but I’ll be goddamned if I know what it is.”

Brenda blamed Melanie’s boyfriend, Derek, with his skinny, slouching posture and sullen, pimply face. She hated the dead-eyed, possessive looks he cast towards Melanie. Worse was the way Melanie leaned into him, allowing herself to be held, anxious to please.

“I don’t like what he’s doing to you,” Brenda said one night. She’d fallen asleep on the sofa watching the news and was awakened when Melanie pushed open the front door.

Melanie laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“All this concern about my well being.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Kidding”

Brenda stared at her for a moment. "Can you sit down?"

Melanie crossed to the sofa and dropped to a sitting position.

"Are you okay?"

"Suuure." Melanie's voice seemed to come from the edge of a dream.

"Are you high?"

"Are you?" Melanie nodded towards the wine glass on the coffee table.

"I'm worried about you, honey."

"Why?"

"Because of what he's doing to you, the way he's changing you."

"Who?"

"You know who. Derek."

Melanie leaned forward, a smile etching across her mouth, eyes unfocused. "What do you think he's doing, fucking me?"

Brenda slapped her. The sound was startling, as if disconnected from her action. A red mark welled on the side of Melanie's cheek. "Oh God, I'm sorry."

Melanie leaned back, fingering the side of her face. "Don't worry, he's not fucking me."

Brenda tried to control the tremble in her voice. "I'm sorry. I just want you to be happy."

Melanie laughed, head bobbing forward and back as if it were suddenly too heavy for her neck to support. “Is that all? Okay, Mommy. I’m happy.”

When Brenda told Rick, he frowned. “What exactly did she say?”

“That she wasn’t having sex with that little shit. She said, ‘Don’t worry, he’s not fucking me.’ But in a really sarcastic, smart ass way.” Brenda reached for the pack of cigarettes. Rick nodded, stared at her while he fished a lighter from his shirt pocket and lit her cigarette.

“That’s how kids are these days. It’s all about shock value, seeing how far they can push it.”

Brenda exhaled. “I worry that I’m losing her.”

“You’re not losing her.”

“I think about those girls at the truck stops.”

When they first met, Rick told her about life on the road, including the teenage girls: runaways. He knew what would happen to most of them, saw them walking in the shadows between the rigs, and it made him sick. He started to talk to some of them, asked where they were from and why they were on the road. Sometimes he offered them bus fare home, other times he gave them rides, figuring, he said, they were safer with him than the predators he saw eye-balling them.

“Melanie’s a good girl, she’ll be all right.”

She nodded, wanting to believe his assurance.

“I’ll tell you what,” Rick said, leaning back in his chair, “pretty as Melanie is, I don’t know what she sees in that little jerk.” He shook his head, incredulous, disgusted.

§

As the summer wore on, Brenda began to realize she could never get far enough away, and although she’d said nothing to Rick, she had started to think she needed to be on her own. It was an instinct at first, like a craving for a particular food which her mother always said was the body’s way of saying it needed a certain nutrient. Brenda needed solitude. She’d find Rick standing in the doorway to Melanie’s room, and when he turned to her there was more than sadness in his expression, more than guilt for having kept the gun. There was something beyond reach or comfort, and it unnerved her.

“Sorry,” he’d say, pulling her into a hug. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she’d answer. “I allowed it.”

Then he’d kiss her forehead and wander off to watch a game on television or sip beer on his lawn chair in the backyard.

Later, if he reached to her side of the bed, his touch was needy, desperate. She'd keep her eyes open as he moved atop her, the darkness of the room an endless void, his breath gasping in her ear like a man climbing a steep hill. She'd pull him closer until she felt his shuddering halt. She wanted to be held, the reassuring calm of his voice, but when his breathing dissolved into a soft snore, she'd curl onto her side of the bed. Fear seized her like a hand at the back of the neck. She realized the fear was not new, but something uncovered, a light peeling away shadows. She'd close her eyes and pray "Dear God, please help me" again and again, until the words numbed her into sleep.

§

On her last day in the house, Brenda sat at the kitchen table and thought about pouring a glass of wine from the bottle she had chilling in the refrigerator. But that was for after, she would need it to sleep. She tapped a cigarette from the pack on the table, lit it, and stared at the cardboard box sitting behind her ashtray and coffee mug.

Earlier that week, she'd told Rick she needed to be alone for a while. He should go on to Phoenix and start his new job.

"The job can wait."

She shook her head. "I just don't think I can be around anyone right now. I know that sounds strange."

He smiled tentatively, eyes narrowing. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

She looked at him. The creases in his face reminded her of the lines on maps marking rivers and streams. "I just need time."

Rick blinked several times, as if the effort of meeting her stare caused his eyes to sting. "Are you leaving me?"

"No," she said, not sure if it was true, which meant it might not be a lie.

"Shit. I knew it."

"Rick."

"That goddamn gun." He shook his head. "How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?"

"It's not the gun."

"Then what?" His expression wasn't sorrowful as it had been so often that summer, but hurt, angry, like a man falsely accused.

"Time," she said. "I just need time to myself."

She could tell he wanted to say more, saw in the downward shift of his eyes a calculation, a weighing of words. But he remained silent. In the end, he

did as she asked, loaded his tools and a duffel bag into the back of his truck and headed west.

It was four o'clock and time to go. Time while the cemetery gate was still open and there was sunlight. Brenda made sure her cigarette was out and rinsed the coffee mug in the sink. Turning to the table she exhaled audibly to suppress a shiver.

§

There were no other cars in sight when she drove through the gate of St. Luke's Catholic Cemetery. Late afternoon sunlight streaked through oaks and maples as she followed the narrow road up and around to the top of a small rise, where she slowed to a stop and parked. The branches of a maple cast dancing shadows on the hood of her car. Past the maple were the graves of nearly all the family members on her mother's side, starting with Brenda's great grandparents. Brenda had not been here since her mother's burial a little over a year earlier. Melanie had stood next to her that day, holding her hand as the priest recited the prayers of the Catholic burial service. Her daughter stared solemnly at the casket, her expression never changing, a presence but not present, Brenda remembered thinking.

She opened the car door, took the cardboard box from the passenger side, and stepped out. The air brushed her face as she looked at the cluster of tombstones. Cradling the box against her chest with both arms, she walked across the grass to her parents' graves. Behind them were her grandparents and great grandparents and to each side various aunts and uncles, and one cousin killed in a head-on collision when he was sixteen and Brenda was seven.

She knelt and gently placed the box in front of her. The grass felt soft and cool through the knees of her slacks. She leaned all the way over and kissed the top of the box. "My sweet girl." She removed the lid and the black plastic bag and turned it upside down over her mother's grave, spilling a gray pile of ash and grit. On her hands and knees, she began to spread the pile, working it into the grass, lifting handfuls and casting them gently up and down and side to side as evenly as she could.

She sat back, eyes closed, hands upturned in her lap. She saw Melanie as she had discovered her—head against the wall, arms splayed, one leg tucked awkwardly under the other, like a ballerina who suddenly collapsed. The wall still wet and red with blood and brain. Brenda did not remember what happened after that. The police found her kneeling with Melanie's head in her lap, stroking the side of her face, rocking gently as if her daughter were sleeping.

Brenda opened her eyes. She rubbed her hands together, feeling the grit like grains of sand, then wiped them on the grass.

She prayed for God to forgive her. She lay on her side, the tombstones looming large and cold as she looked across the ash-strewn grass. She had decided to go to Florida. She'd call Rick when she got there. Could she tell him then? Explain the slow dread that had seeped into her that summer, like the fear of a terminal illness? Admit she had stayed hoping to find out it wasn't true?

Brenda closed her eyes and thought about the ocean, the utter silence beneath the warm, heavy water. She imagined it as a kind of baptism, a washing away of what she feared most: knowing.

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