

## **A Constant State of Panic**

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**2019 Shorty Story Competition Winner**

We kept the Narcan in the drawer by the front door where we also had the duct tape, the matches, the bowl of spare keys, and the knotted-up cables for phones that didn't exist anymore. There was a fight about it. I wanted to keep it in the medicine cabinet, because it was medicine. He said to think of it as more like a run of the mill household item. Like the duct tape, which we also sometimes needed at a moment's notice. I asked him not to say things like that. He said that it needed to be in the key drawer because what if Graham needed to get at it—because if we kept it in the medicine cabinet, Graham would need to pull in a chair from the kitchen or climb onto the bathroom sink, which would take time, and would also put him at risk of a fall, especially if he was moving quickly. I said that I did not want Graham knowing about the Narcan. He asked what the point was, then, of having the Narcan at all. I said that I did not want Graham knowing about the Narcan. He said: Graham is the one who told me where to get the Narcan. He said: He learned about it at school.

I picked up the phone immediately. I called Laurel, who I had once taught, and who was now teaching my grandson. She did not pick up—it was almost midnight, I realized—but I left a voicemail for her, and also texted her to let her know that she should listen to her voicemail. I put the phone down.

I said: I think I would have gone absolutely crazy if texting existed when I was a teacher. Can you imagine all of these parents texting me in the middle of the night? I think I would have lost it.

He said: I don't think anyone texts the art teacher in the middle of the night.

I told him to screw go himself and he wrapped me up in a big hug and then we went to bed, passing the open door to Hannah's room, which Hannah was not in, because it causes fights to try to give a curfew to a twenty-seven-year-old.

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I was becoming a light sleeper, which was a kind of person that I had never been. I woke up when my husband got up to use the bathroom in the night. I woke up when animals made noise in the woods out back, and not just the foxes, which had always been able to startle me awake with their eerie, loud yipping—it got to the point where even the squirrels padding across the roof could do it. I woke up when the windchimes rang off the front porch even in the faintest breeze.

It was making me cranky in the morning, and slow. When Graham had to shake me awake two mornings in a row to ask me to make breakfast, my husband told me that I had to start setting an alarm. There wasn't a fight. He was right—I made Graham late to school that first day, and barely made it on time the second.

I tried to set the alarm before bed that night. I couldn't figure out the sequence of buttons because I had never needed to do it before. I had been getting up at the same time every day since I started teaching art at the elementary school. Even when I moved to a substitute schedule, I woke up to make Hannah and Lynn their breakfasts, and by the time Lynn was off at college Hannah had moved back in with Graham, so there was always someone to feed.

Of course when he was very young and Hannah wasn't doing too badly, she could have been the one to take care of the breakfasts. When Lynn was home from college on break she would say so to me. As she sipped coffee she would watch me make two

cinnamon-sugar toasts—one for Hannah, one for Graham—and sometimes she would say it out loud and sometimes the way she glared at the cinnamon-sugar toasts said it for her: Can't Hannah do anything for herself? I would tell her that of course she could, but that I was a mother, and I liked to do things like this for my children—and did she want some toast?

I couldn't help but think about those mornings while I fiddled with the alarm clock. I clicked one button and the red boxy numbers got brighter, and then I clicked it again and they started to blink. I turned the alarm clock upside down and on its side but wasn't sure which of the other buttons would change the numbers. I pressed one down. The radio started playing. I found an arrow, using the tip of my finger because I couldn't see the tiny words printed around the buttons, but it turned out to be the volume. The staticky commercial I had landed on got louder—something about used cars. I managed to shut off the commercial, and the next time I got the numbers blinking, I also got them to change. I set the alarm for six-thirty. Then the number changed to six-thirty-one without my touching anything. I had not set the alarm but actually changed the time entirely. At that point my eyes and throat started to sting and I realized, as the clock got even blurrier and more difficult to navigate in my hands, that this alarm clock was beginning to make me cry. I moaned. Nobody was in the room except for my husband next to me, but I felt the kind of deep embarrassment that I had only felt when I was younger, and sometimes drank too much, and sometimes said a horrendously stupid thing while drunk, which I then remembered as I woke up with a hangover, which was so horrendously stupid that it made me moan then like I did now with the alarm clock in my hands.

My husband took the clock from my hands and reset the time to what it had been a minute ago and put it back on the nightstand. He squeezed my hand and said why don't I just use my phone like everyone else does these days.

I told him that I was just so tired and he said that he understood.

I said that I didn't love the alarm sound that the phone made, but that tomorrow I would ask Hannah how to change it to a different sound.

He said that he was sure I would sleep deeply and soundly tonight.

I woke up again in the middle of the night because of the windchimes. I sat up to listen, but it was quiet except for the fading of the ring that had woken me up. It was two-forty-two in boxy red numbers on the nightstand beside me. It must have been a breeze.

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There was a group I went to a few times that was unhelpful. Some woman from Augusta named Charlie was talking a lot about coping mechanisms and fault, and how there didn't have to be fault, how lack of fault made this whole thing harder, but it was the talk with Alex Dubois out in the parking lot afterward that made more sense to me.

Alex said: It's not like it just happens *at random*.

He was smoking a cigarette and was letting me sit in the driver's seat of his car, where the heat warmed my back while he stood in front of me and blew the smoke out to join the exhaust toward the back of the car. The others had left, even Charlie from Augusta. The parking lot was empty.

Look at Eric, he said, and look at Brandon.

Brandon, at that time, had just gotten out of jail on a possession charge. Eric had graduated from college and was a policeman here in town.

He said: I raised them the exact same. The *exact* same. A needle didn't fall out of the sky and suddenly stick him and addict him, you know? Along the way, someone made a choice, you know?

I told him yes, that was exactly right, and that I was tired of talking about Big Pharma all the time, I mean—really? Big Pharma?

He said: All these meetings end like that. This is the third one I've been to. It's just everyone mad at Big Pharma. But there's nothing we can do about that, right? It's like—you teach your kid to ride a bike.

I did not know where he was going with this but I said: Exactly.

My breath was white like the smoke coming from his cigarette. I leaned back into the heat of the car.

He said: You do your best to teach them to ride safely. Teach them not to bike in the middle of the road like an idiot. Of course, once in a while there's a drunk driver, or a crazy driver who's not looking, and swerves into the side of the road where a kid is.

Still not sure what I was agreeing to but believing that I would, I said: *Exactly*.

He said: Now everyone's kid is biking in the middle of the goddamn road. But everyone's acting like the cars that are hitting them are coming out of nowhere.

I stomped my foot on the ground. I wished that he led the meetings instead of Charlie from Augusta.

I said: Right. And what *I* need, Alex, what *I* need, is for someone to tell me what I did wrong, so that I don't do it again with Graham. So he's a safer biker—or whatever.

He said: Right. *Exactly*.

I asked him what it was—what happened with Brandon that didn't with Eric. Maybe it would point me in the right direction. Because Lynn and Hannah—I hadn't

raised them all that differently. They were just different. From the moments they were born, Hannah was like me, and Lynn was like her father. But Eric and Brandon had always been pretty similar, which I knew because I had taught them both in art class, so: what happened?

Alex blew out his last breath of smoke through his teeth, and it hung in a big white cloud over my head. My hands were under my pits and I was going back and forth between leaning forward to hug myself tighter and leaning into the car to feel more of the heater on my back. He dropped the butt. He didn't step on it so I did, grinding it down with the toe of my boot.

He said: I have no fucking idea, actually.

Later in bed with my husband I stayed up very late with my eyes closed while he read in bed with the booklight I had gotten him for Christmas so he would stop keeping the nightstand lamp on.

"What if Graham is riding a bike and there's a drunk driver?" I said. "What can we do about that?"

My husband closed his book. He put his hand on his face and rubbed up and down. He asked me if we couldn't just please make it through the goddamn winter first, which I thought was a fair question.

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Lynn didn't like to talk about Hannah on the phone. She would let me go on and on about her but wouldn't comment the way she would when I talked about Graham or my husband or even my own days, as plain as my days were. She had gotten better at this, too, as she had gotten older in that town all the way down by Portland. She would even ask about the shows I watched, and I knew when she asked that she didn't care at

all about the answer, but I knew that she was asking because Hannah wasn't around to ask me anymore, and I felt loved by Lynn, and taken care of by her, because, like my husband, asking questions didn't come naturally to her. I was so proud to have taught Lynn how to be kind. So I told her about my shows, and about the new rug that I was hooking.

Another time that she was very kind: Hannah had just got into rehab, and I was going on and on about it. I told her about how everyone just seemed to be going in and out of rehab, so it would probably just be a big money suck. But Lynn, who never talked about Hannah, said: You never know.

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When I got home the car was not in the driveway, even though it was about nine P.M. and Graham didn't have any activities scheduled that late. When I got home the duct tape drawer was open and some of the keys from the key bowls were on the floor under it. I walked very slowly around the house, craning my neck to peer around corners and doorways before following with my feet. When I got to the dining room I sat at the table for a moment. When I got to my empty bedroom I sat on the bed for a moment. When I got to Graham's empty room I picked up the several articles of clothing that he had left on the floor earlier in the week and I had told him to pick up. I put them in the hamper. I walked to Hannah's empty room and not a single thing looked out of place. Nothing to pick up. No stains on the floor, no broken lamps, although I was not sure what kind of stains I was looking for, and had no idea why I expected the lamp in particular to be shattered on the floor.

The hospital when I got there was not very busy. Only a few cars in the lot, and ours with its wheel up on the curb in front of the entrance. What I saw when I got inside

was Graham in the lobby with his head down, swinging his legs back and forth in the seat beside the table with the children's books on it. He didn't look up when I got in. My husband was filling out paperwork at the front desk with his back to me.

I passed behind my husband and went to the open curtain where I saw Hannah's jacket at the end of the bed but when I got to the curtain I saw that she was not in the bed. It was just rumpled sheets. Graham came up next to me and leaned his head on my arm.

He said: She's already gone.

In the brief silence after, my body did strange things, went hot and cold and sweaty all at once.

He said: After she woke up, she left. They tried to tell her to stay in bed but she left.

Too late. My knees had already given out and I was on the floor before I realized that Hannah was not dead. Graham jumped away when I fell but then tried to pick me up, which he was too small to do. We had to stay for a few hours after my husband was done filling out the paperwork. They put me in Hannah's bed for observation. I think it was still warm when I laid down.

Graham got into the bed with me—they let him, after he asked if it would be okay—and I explained to him, with my arms around him, that Aunt Lynn had a spare bedroom, and that she had been wondering if he would like to stay with her for a weekend or a month or maybe longer. The school down there was very nice, I told him, and it had a football team.

He said I would come with him, right?



I said that I would probably have to stay here to look after Hannah. I said that I would visit often.

He said that he would not go if I would not go.

I told him that we should probably just not worry about it tonight, but if he wanted to think about it and talk about it more, he should bring it up whenever he'd like. I kicked myself the whole drive home and then in bed after. It was unfair of me to separate a child and his mother and it was unfair of me to, on the other hand, raise a child in this hellish world of Narcan and emergency rooms, and more than anything was unfair of me to take what should have been my horrific decision and pass it off so casually to a seven-year-old.

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When my husband got home with Graham I was outside on the stepladder trying to take the windchimes down. I swore I had been the one to put them up those years and years ago, but even on the stepladder and even on my toes, the tips of my fingers could only barely skim the hook that held them up.

My husband replaced me on the stepladder got the windchimes down no problem and handed them to me. They clattered in the process, much louder and more jarring than they sounded when hanging up.

He said: What's this for?

I said: They keep waking me up at night.

Graham rapped his knuckles on the shell in my hand and it rang hollowly. He said that he liked hearing them at night. He asked what there was for his after school snack and I told him I had baked snickerdoodles, which made him forget about the windchimes and run into the house. I called after him to take his boots off—he did,

halfway through the living room—and when he made it to the kitchen my husband told me that we should go inside, or at least stop keeping the door open.

I told him he could put the windchimes back up.

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Dolly Reed's daughter had been hurt in a bad car accident on the highway when she swerved around a deer instead of running through it, and Dolly lorded that car accident over those of us whose kids hadn't had accidents. She said at every chance she got how her daughter *started* using. No matter what the discussion question was—did they ever say something very hurtful to you while they were using that they had never said before, did they ever steal from you, what is your biggest fear in the next year or month or day—she gave us this ridiculous preamble about the accident, and about the doctor who had prescribed medication instead of physical therapy, and if it hadn't been for that doctor then her sweet little girl would never have said that thing or stolen that money or ended up in such a downward spiral that Dolly couldn't even sleep thinking about what might happen tomorrow.

Alex Dubois and I would look at each other every time she talked. It got to the point where he would roll his eyes every time she started to choke up, which was usually at the part about the deer. It got to the point that I would have to bite my lip and hold my breath because of the faces he'd make, and then finally one day I couldn't help it and when she said the part about the stupid fucking doctor I chuckled and then I clapped my hand over my mouth. I could immediately tell that it wasn't going to work so I just uncovered my mouth and cracked up.

While stared at me including Alex Dubois, Charlie from Augusta asked if I had something to contribute to the discussion. What I had to contribute to the discussion

was a reminder that Dolly Reed's stupid fucking daughter had actually brought a gun into the gas station and aimed it at poor Henry to get at the sixty bucks in the cash register so deer or no deer and doctor or no doctor, her daughter was currently the most horrible kid of all and, to be honest, had never been very good in art class either.

But what I said out loud was that I didn't think I could do this anymore, and it was probably time for me to go home.

Nobody stopped me. Not even Alex Dubois, who didn't say anything at the time, but who later called me at home to tell me how hilarious it had been and to tell me about the look on Dolly's face and we laughed and we laughed and we laughed and we laughed.

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Since I couldn't do anything about the windchimes or the sounds that the animals made in the backyard, I started staying up late, and then taking a nap in the afternoon before Graham came back from school. Once I started with the naps I felt like an entirely new person. I was awake, alert, and I became less likely to cry about things like alarm clocks.

With all of this new energy, I started to take night drives. The roads were empty and quiet and peaceful, and I could drive slow, sometimes listening to the radio if I wanted company. My husband asked me why, and I said that it was a nice, peaceful thing for me to do.

I did not mention that I slowed down near the gas station, where I knew that Hannah and her friends sometimes hung out, or that some nights I even went all the way to the truck stop or the Sam's Club and took some laps around the parking lot. When I did that, I would put a tiny bit of gas into the tank on my way home. Not that there was any reason to hide how far or long I'd driven from my husband.

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I had been behind Dolly in the line at Hannaford for a full couple of minutes before she turned around smiling and said: So are you and Ethan doing better?

I said: Ethan my husband Ethan?

She nodded. Her smile got bigger the longer I stared at her and eventually I asked the question that she wanted so badly for me to ask, which was: What do you mean?

She said: *Oh*.

She laughed a little. I wondered if I was feeling the same thing when she laughed that she had felt when I had laughed at her. I wished the line would move quicker but there was a young girl at the register teaching an even younger boy how to press the buttons and I was stuck.

Dolly said: Well, it's just that at group, Ethan said that sometimes it can put a strain on your relationship. You know. Having Hannah in the house.

I told her that Hannah was almost never in the house, and that I didn't know what she was talking about, and that she must have misunderstood. She put her hand on my hand and I wanted to unscrew the cap of my half gallon of milk and pour it over her head but instead I just said: The line is moving.

My husband was not home when I got there and so I called Alex Dubois. I asked him if my husband had been to Charlie from Augusta's therapy group and he said that he had. I told him about running into Dolly (he said: *Jesus H. Christ*) and asked him if he would please tell me what my husband said even through it was supposed to be confidential, and he told me that I had to be dumb if I thought anything was really confidential.

I said: Well I feel pretty dumb right now. He didn't even tell me he was going. And then he goes and tells everyone all these things?

He said that it wasn't really *all these things*, more like a couple vague things that everyone else was also saying about their own marriages, if they still had marriages at all. He said that everyone was saying things like *sometimes I feel like I'm being blamed and it's all we talk about and it's driving me crazy or we just don't talk about it and it's driving me crazy*. I told him that I didn't care what everyone else was saying in general, and I wanted to hear what my husband in particular was saying about me in particular.

He said: Well he did say that you were kind of anxious.

I said: Well sure.

He said: I mean in particular he said this one thing.

I asked him to tell me and he did. When Graham got home I watched him walk from the bus up the driveway and we sat down and did some homework with a snack—he liked to get homework out of the way quickly, like Lynn used to. Afterward his friend Tommy's mother dropped off Tommy and the boys went out back and off into the woods. While they were still out playing my husband came home.

I said: Why the heck would you tell everyone that I'm in a constant state of panic?

He said: Oh lord.

He hung up his jacket and came to sit with me in the kitchen and put his hand on mine.

He told me that he was sorry that it got around to me like that but that he hadn't said it in a bad context. The context had been that he was worried about me and the stress that the whole situation was causing to me every single day.

I said: Why don't you talk to *me* about this stuff?

He told me that what he had realized by talking in group—and he called it *group* like Dolly Reed and not *the group* which bothered me—was that he felt responsibility to be the pillar in the household. He felt that me and Graham and Hannah needed someone who at least seemed like he was reliable and had his stuff together, and he didn't want to worry me with his feelings.

I said: Of course I know you're reliable. You're my rock.

He said: That's kind of the point, I think, is what Charlie was saying.

I said: Charlie says some crazy things. But, I mean. If you feel like I put too much pressure on you—(he said: I don't, no, it's pressure I put on myself)—I mean, you can talk to me. It could be nice to know that I'm not panicking alone, I think. Not that it's panic, though. That's not fair.

He asked me what it was, then, as we both stood up.

I said: It's that my daughter is constantly about to die.

He didn't say anything. He started to cry, and because Charlie from Augusta told him that he had to stop trying to be the rock, I held him while he cried and I decided that I could wait until later to ask him to call it *the group* instead of *group*, which sounded cultish.

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The windchimes clanged. I jumped up from the couch, where I had been rug-hooking, and opened the door. Graham was picking up his backpack from the porch, heading inside. He asked me what his after school snack was, and then asked was I okay?

I said: Did you just ring the windchimes?

He said he had, and put his backpack down to show me. He took a couple of steps back to get a running start, and then leapt up, grazing the dangling chain with his fingers. He must have gotten higher last time and hit the bell harder, because this time they didn't clang. They just rang gently, like they might in a breeze. He grinned at me triumphantly.

He said: I can finally reach.

I said: Your mom used to do that. Every time she came in the house.

He turned around and picked his backpack up and walked past me without looking up at me, saying that he knows, *duh*.

I almost called his teacher Laurel later that day to tell her that Graham was picking up some odd new disrespectful tone from the other kids at school, because he had never said *duh* to me before, but then I realized that it would not be fair to her—that there were disrespectful kids all around, and that worrying too much about Graham saying *duh* might come across as panicky.

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Two days after I clarified to my husband that I was not panicky, I got a call from Hannah, and I could tell that it was Hannah even though the number wasn't in my contacts and even though the voice on the other end wasn't a voice but a wailing, choking, screaming, wordless cry. I could tell it was her even though I'd never heard her like that. She sounded like the coyotes when they howled out back. Everyone had always said that the coyotes sounded haunting like a woman crying, but I had never thought they sounded like a woman until I heard my daughter on the other side of the phone. I knew immediately that someone was dead.

I said: Hannah, Hannah, what's wrong, Hannah, where are you, Hannah, Hannah, please tell me where you are, please let me come get you, Hannah, Hannah, Hannah, I love you, I love you.

And I kept saying her name louder and louder but I don't think she could hear me over herself, and so I hung up the phone and I went to the car and that was when I noticed Graham running after me, zipping up his jacket, and I turned and knelt down and put my hands on his shoulders and said: You have to stay home.

His eyes went wide and scared and his teeth started to chatter, even though it wasn't cold enough for it that day.

He said, haltingly: But—my—mom?

I said: She's okay. She's fine—she's fine, I think.

He said: But I'm—scared.

And I realized that he had never stayed home alone before. We went back inside together and I got on the phone with my husband and told him that he had to come home and explained why and he told me that *he* would go to the hospital and *I* would stay home with Graham but I insisted and insisted without actually saying, but thinking the entire time: She called *me*.

So he said that he was on his way home and that I should wait for him, and I hung up the phone and told Graham the plan, and Graham, with his jacket still on and zipped, his teeth still chattering, looked up at me and said that it was okay, that I could go, if Pa would be home in a few minutes like I said on the phone. And I went, and I didn't let myself feel bad about it until later when I came home and my husband let me have it.



They told me at the hospital that I just missed her. Dolly's daughter was there. She was five years ahead of Hannah in school but I found out, as I interrupted various friends and nurses until I got the story out of them piece by piece, that Hannah had become very close with Dolly's daughter recently, and had actually been here just three days ago with her when Dolly's daughter's cousin—Hannah's new boyfriend, apparently—overdosed, which he had also done a month ago, and which he had also done approximately an hour ago, this time for good. The story was that he had finally gotten into rehab and was doing just one more before he had to pack up and go.

Everyone was annoyed with me. I could tell because some of them told me to get out of the way or get lost. Others just kept telling me, as if I hadn't understood it the first or second or third time, *she's not here, I told you already, she's not here anymore*. I sat down in the waiting room and called my husband to tell him that Hannah wasn't here but that she was still alive and he was short with me on the phone, though he didn't say why. (I knew why.) He told me to come home, and I told him that I might be a little longer and I sat down in the waiting room thinking that she might come back.

She didn't come back. The family came, friends came and left, and everything settled down—the nurses finally called in a mother and father with a little boy who appeared to have broken or sprained his wrist, which was in a kind of splint made with a wooden kitchen utensil. The mother had been holding a book up in front of his face and reading the story to him loudly and directly in his ear, and the father had been kind of pacing in front of them, putting himself between the boy and the crying friends and family whenever the boy's eyes drifted up from the pages. The father went a couple of times to the desk to ask if there was another place to wait, but until it settled down, the nurse just kept saying: give me a minute, give me a minute.

Eventually Dolly's daughter seemed to run out of friends and family to talk to and, probably just because of not having anywhere to go, she sat down beside me and told me how her cousin died. How when he started to turn blue Hannah started to shake him and scream at him, not to wake up but to go fuck himself if he really was going to do this to her again, and how when the EMTs got there she stood up and folded her arms and went into the corner and said that she didn't care anymore, she didn't even care, they should just let him OD, just let him die, the fucking asshole. But then when they started to mutter and swear under their breaths, when they started to move a little slower and cover their mouths when they spoke into their walkie-talkies, Dolly's daughter told me how Hannah stopped talking, and then started again, how she told them to hurry up, why wouldn't they hurry up, how Dolly's daughter had to wrap her arms around her to keep her from attacking them and getting arrested while they carted Dolly's daughter's cousin out the front steps, how Hannah screamed at them: bring him back, *bring him back, why aren't you doing anything, bring him back!*

My husband when I got home told me that I had to make a choice. He told me that when he came inside Graham had been huddled in the corner of the couch with his jacket still on and a blanket over his head, shivering. That he kept saying that he wasn't scared, just cold, but that he was sweating when my husband got the jacket off him.

I went into Graham's bedroom and held him until he woke up and I told him that I was sorry but it still didn't feel like enough, and as he dozed off again onto my I remembered that he had a test tomorrow in the morning—I realized that I probably shouldn't have woken him up to begin with.

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I went to meet up with Alex Dubois at the diner to break the news to him that my husband wanted me to call him a little bit less. He said that he understood, and I said that I was sorry, and he said again that he understood, and that it was no problem. He said it in a way that would make it all right for me to get up and leave my coffee half-drunk on the counter, but instead I went on explaining.

I said: He's not saying anything about *you*—I mean, he's not implying anything about you and me. He just wants me to talk to him more about things that are bothering me, and he thinks that I talk about all of those things with you so much that I've given up on talking with him about them.

He said that it all made a lot of sense.

But I still felt like I was abandoning him, even though he had a wife—maybe he didn't like to talk to her about it, either—so I asked him what else was going on with him. He said that his son Eric had come over for dinner last night and was having a hard time. That, as a cop, he had been sent with the chaplain to notify two families in the past month, one of them yesterday, and that it was getting to him. I asked him if his other son Brandon had been at dinner. He said that yes, he had: sometimes Brandon still came home for dinner.

I asked him if he could please ask Brandon, next time he saw him, how Hannah was doing, if he ever saw her, because it had been pretty long since she came home. I did not say it in a panicky way, and in fact probably undersold how long it had been since she had been home.

He said: Sure. Should I call you about it?

We laughed. I said that maybe instead he could just ask if Brandon would bring Hannah by eventually—that it could be during the school day, maybe, if she didn't want to upset Graham.

He said that he would tell Brandon, next time he came around for dinner.

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On Saturday when I woke up my room was filled with daylight, and there was a hand pressing my shoulder back and forth and a hushed voice: Mom—Mom, wake up.

Hannah! I said. I opened my eyes. Lynn smiled at me like she was sorry—not like it was her fault that she was not Hannah, but like she was sorry for me for asking for Hannah, sorry for witnessing my embarrassing desperation. She kept her hand on my shoulder.

She said: It's eleven-thirty, Mom. Why are you still in bed?

I was sure that my husband had already told her that I didn't get into bed until three or four, that I was always driving around all night like a panicky lunatic. Even if I told her they were quiet, calm drives—that I always followed the speed limit and stopped at stop signs—she would take her father's word for it. So I said: I didn't know you were coming.

And then, remembering that it had been a very long time since I had seen her, I said, You two *do* look alike still, even with that crazy haircut.

She smiled in an unhappy way, tightly, and gave my shoulder a final squeeze as she stood up.

I'll make you some lunch, she said, and then we need to talk about Graham.

What I found out sitting across the kitchen table from my daughter with a ham and cheese sandwich in front of me was that Hannah called her, almost all the time.

Practically every day. It was clear that Lynn expected this to upset me—she kept smiling, sadly, and broke it to me with a warning that I might be confused by what she was about to say. Lynn wasn't a sugarcoater, but she did hold my hands, our intertwined fingers hovering over the sandwich, when she got to the "every day" part.

I held it together, afraid of coming across as panicky. It was long enough for her to explain that Hannah thought she was doing a nice thing, that Hannah had watched her friends become enemies with their parents and children over thefts, failed rehabs, late nights, and all that. It was when Lynn said that *she just loves you all so much* that I couldn't take it anymore and went back into the bedroom and wept into my pillow—quietly, because Graham was in the next room playing on his Xbox this whole time and I did not want to alarm him.

Lynn came in and sat down again next to me and put her hand back on my shoulder. I got the sense that she approved of Hannah staying away and wondered, horribly, if perhaps she had suggested this route to Hannah, or at least encouraged it, in their daily conversations over the phone.

She told me that it would be okay and I told her no: it would not.

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Alex Dubois called me. He didn't say much. Just that he was checking to see if I was home, because his son was bringing someone to see me. He asked me if Graham was home. I told him that he was not—that he was staying with his Aunt Lynn right now. He asked me if my husband was home. I told him that he would be later today. Alex told me that I should stay put.

Which son, Alex? I said, but he had hung up the phone. I knew that he had hung up. In fact, I waited until I heard the dial tone to ask.

I had been in my nightgown and didn't want to answer the door looking like I had just gotten out of bed so I changed, but when I changed I forgot to look at what I took out of the drawers until the clothes were on me, but by then I was afraid that if I started to change again I would still be in the middle of getting changed when they pulled up, so I left my room in my husband's work shirt and my house-cleaning sweatpants.

I was a couple feet from the door staring at it when I heard the tires in the driveway. I could have leaned over to look out the window and see who was coming but I didn't. I listened to the doors open and shut—one, two—and listened to the boots crunching on the sand and salt up to the porch. They came up the steps and the windchimes—I leaned forward and took a step toward the door, turning my head to get my ear closer—yes, the windchimes rang.

Because I had been listening for them, I had known that I would panic upon hearing them. That my heart would start to thump—that I would try to determine, just by listening, whether it had been a breeze or a hand that rang them, just so that the shock wouldn't kill me when I opened the door to see Hannah or to see that it would never be Hannah again. I had known that she would be on my mind as I opened the door, just as she had been on my mind while I waited at door, just like she was while I slept and while I drove around town at night and while I made Graham his breakfast and did his homework with him and talked to Lynn on the phone. I was fairly certain that I was going to have a heart attack whether it was her or not.

But that was not what happened. Instead what happened when I heard the windchimes was that I thought of Graham. I saw him jumping up to graze the bells with his fingertips and grinning about it. I saw it so clearly that for a moment I wasn't even thinking of Hannah at all—I couldn't wait to call him, to tell him that my husband and I

would be packing up the house and coming to live in his new town with him, how we would sell this house and buy a little place near Aunt Lynn's so that I could make him his cinnamon-sugar toast in the morning. I would say that I was so sorry for taking so long and for sending him away before we could join him, but that I had been tired lately, and distracted, and having a hard time thinking, but that now—now, standing at my door with the windchimes ringing—I was ready.