

“I met another one today.” I had my back to Dan when he said this—I was standing at the counter chopping onions for a casserole. I heard the creak of the old kitchen chair as he leaned backwards, and I knew, without looking, that he’d put down his coffee mug and folded his arms across his chest.

“She was about the right age and she had the same colour hair,” he said. I still didn’t turn around. Dan sighed. “Well, it wasn’t her. But it could have been.”

I selected another onion and held it for a moment, weighing it in my palm. Then I laid it on the wooden chopping board and picked up the knife. The knife was a good one, left over from my previous life with Dan, and it cut the onion cleanly, slicing it into perfect translucent rings. I slid them into the frying pan. These casseroles, too, were the remains of another life. Every Saturday, when Anna was little, I would make a casserole: onions, peppers, garlic, ground beef, sometimes frozen corn or peas. Dan would always be there, no matter how tough a case he was working on. It was often our only meal of the week as a family.

“What was she?” I said, turning the hood fan on. “A hooker or something? Drunk and disorderly?” I lifted a green pepper out of a paper bag, running my fingers over its waxy skin. The onions began to sizzle and pop, releasing their fragrance into the room.

“Naw,” Dan said. The word sounded like a grunt. “She wasn’t one of the bad guys.” The chair creaked again as he leaned forward. I glanced at the clock on the wall over the stove. Jill would be on her way. She stopped by every Saturday en route from the drop zone at Harley’s Field, and we went out for a couple of drinks before

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she headed home. Except that on this day (maybe even at this moment, as I crushed a clove of garlic and stirred it into the onions), Jill's car was being rammed head-on by a bunch of teenage joyriders in a stolen pickup truck. I didn't know that yet, so I carried on chopping and listening to Dan talk.

"She works in a restaurant that got done over by a couple of thugs last night. Smashed the place up pretty good." Dan pushed the chair back and got up and came to put his coffee mug in the sink. I noticed he hadn't buttoned up his flannel shirt properly across the stomach. Dan's put on a lot of weight in the last six years. He seems softer somehow, as though the hard edges that were the source of his energy, that made him such a good cop, have blurred, collapsed in on themselves. Sometimes I hardly recognize him.

"Smashed it up pretty good," Dan said again. He ran his thumb along the edge of the porcelain sink, where it was cracked and chipped with age and hard use. "When are you guys gonna move to a better place?"

After Dan had gone back to work and my casserole was safely in the oven, I made a cup of tea and took it into the living room. The room was small and one side was cluttered with secondhand furniture that Michael was meaning to fix up but hadn't got round to. In the six months that Michael and I had been living together, the pile had grown steadily, until it now filled nearly half the room. The tables and dressers and sofas were covered with dust.

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I sat down in the rocking chair by the window and put my feet up on the old leather stool. My knees ached, and my shoulders. Now that I'm in my forties, I've noticed that parts of my body hurt for no good reason, like a protest against advancing age. It seems cruel to me, the way time passes, that there's no way of holding it back. There are grey hairs sprinkled among the brown, deep creases around my eyes, freckles on the backs of my hands. A middle-aged woman.

I thought about what Dan had said. He has a way of talking about Anna, of bringing her into every conversation if he can. Possible sightings of her on street corners, or waiting for buses, or reminiscences about things I don't remember, or comparing her to people he meets. Quite random people sometimes. People who are nothing like her.

Dan has done this, constantly, since Anna disappeared. It's his way of holding on to her. I used to do it too, for the first few months, until the day I grabbed the arm of a strange girl on the street. After that I went home and cleaned out Anna's room. I carted everything down to the Salvation Army: clothes, books, furniture, everything. When Dan came home and I told him what I'd done, he went up to her room and stayed there for a long time. When he came back down he walked straight past me and out to the car. That was the beginning of the end of our marriage.

I thought about this now, in my rocking chair, listening to the floorboards groaning as I moved slowly back and forth. If I'd had more patience, more faith, would things have worked out differently? Then the timer went off for the casserole, and I got up to turn the oven off, and go upstairs and change.

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Jill's funeral was held the next Thursday. Everyone commented on how well Michael was holding up, especially since he and Jill had been so close. She'd always looked out for him, ever since they were children. More like a second mother than a sister.

At his mother's house after the funeral service, Michael hugged all the aunts and cousins, and shook hands with the uncles. His hair was properly brushed for once, and he was wearing a dark suit he'd borrowed from a friend. He looked calm, in control. But a few hours later, when I went to look for him in the crowd milling about on the deck, I was met with shrugs and blank faces. "I think he left," said one young cousin, sipping a drink in a plastic cup. "Said something about going to look at a garden." By then the cousins had already started to disperse, the uncles had gathered in the garden for a smoke, and the aunts were circulating, balancing stacks of dirty plates and glasses in their hands. Michael's mother had been given a sedative, and put to bed.

I stayed to help the aunts clean up. Marion and I cleared the rest of the dishes from the dining room, and carried them into the kitchen to be washed. Marion is Michael's mother's youngest sister—we're nearly the same age. We stood together, washing and wiping and putting away, while the other aunts tidied up napkins and wiped crumbs off tablecloths and moved chairs back to their proper places.

I know Anna wouldn't have liked Marion. She's one of those perfect women we used to make fun of, when Anna was younger, when we still laughed together. We'd see them in supermarkets, or in restaurants, or emerging from beauty salons with

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their nails painted and their hair freshly curled, always wearing tailored skirts and high heels. Anna would do impressions of them in the car on the way home, and we'd break into fits of giggles. "I'm so glad you're not like that, Mom," she'd say, tears running down her face. And I'd say "So am I."

"Well I think it's crazy," Marion said, in response to something I'd said.

"Jumping out of airplanes. I don't see why anyone would want to."

"It's called skydiving," I corrected, handing her a clean plate. We were silent for a moment, washing and wiping. I lowered another stack of plates into the sudsy water. "It does seem crazy, doesn't it?" I said. "But Jill loved it. She used to tell me about it, how amazing it was, being alone up there in the sky. She said it was the only time she felt really alive, and that without it, she might as well be dead." I stopped, realizing what I'd said. I glanced sideways at Marion, but she was looking down at the plate, rubbing it hard with a flowered dishcloth.

That night I woke up in our cold, tiny bedroom and Michael's side of the bed was empty. I stretched my arms out across the wrinkled sheets and listened to the sound of his footsteps pacing from the cramped kitchen to the long, narrow living room, and into the room off the hall that we call the dining room, which is piled floor to ceiling with boxes of books, and clothes, and other mementos from a previous time. Anna's time. Anna's and Dan's and mine.

Michael hadn't taken any time off after Jill died. "I can't, can I?" he'd said, avoiding my eyes. "People are depending on me." Michael runs his own landscaping

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business, rattling around town in his old van, with rakes and hoes and shovels and other garden implements bolted securely into place in the back. He started in a small way, in his last year of college, fixing up the gardens of his mother's friends. Now, six years later, the business is doing so well he's been talking about hiring somebody.

The math is easy: last year of college, 22, plus 6, 28. And I'm 44. Michael would be closer to Anna's age than mine. I'm sure it's a constant topic of conversation for people in the town. Educated people, friends even, who roll their eyes when they think we're not looking, or turn up the corners of their mouths. I see them watching Michael, when we're out together, and I know they're wondering what he sees in me. It doesn't bother me, though, when people stare. What do they know?

Dan has his theories, and he's not afraid to expound on them, at length, during his visits. Reliving my youth, he calls it. Trying to erase the past. Pretending it didn't happen. I'm tempted to point out all the women he meets, the way he talks about them, compares them to Anna. If that isn't reliving the past, what is? But I keep my mouth shut.

I thought at first that Dan might be jealous of Michael—Dan is nearly 50 now, and not the man he once was, as he says himself. Not that Michael's looks are anything special, he's too tall and wiry and always wearing those baggy overalls even when he's not gardening. But still.

I didn't know until Dan came round one morning last spring, that we would keep seeing each other. We had been, off and on, since the divorce, but I thought it would end, after Michael and I started living together. We even had Dan over for

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dinner, a few weeks after we moved into this place. One of my casseroles, and cherry pie from the bakery near where I work. When he left, Dan shook Michael's hand, and kissed me on the cheek. But three weeks later, he turned up at the door and I let him in and we went straight up to the bedroom, undressing quickly, not speaking. It was then I realized that Dan could never be jealous of Michael. He had a hold on me that was too strong. We had a hold on each other.

Michael knows about Dan and me, although we both pretend he doesn't. I never know what Michael's thinking, never know where I am with him, even at night in bed, lying with my back pressed up hard against his, listening to his breathing. I tried to explain once, to tell Michael about Dan, about the ties I couldn't bring myself to break. But he stopped me in mid-sentence, putting his hand on my mouth, shaking his head. We were standing on the back porch, and Michael turned away from me, pointing to the big birch tree in the corner, by the fence. "I'll have to get that trimmed," he said. "If one of those branches falls, it could kill somebody."

There was a time, about a year after Anna left, when I thought that Dan and I might get back together. We were seeing each other nearly every week, and there was something so comforting about it, the little rituals we had, the way of talking to each other, the feel of Dan's arms around me in the dark.

But Anna was always there, between us, like an absence, an emptiness, pushing us apart. We were like two people on opposite sides of a deep gorge, with no way to get across.

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Lying in bed that night, after the funeral, after I'd heard the door shut, quietly, and the crunch of the van's tires on the gravel as Michael backed it slowly out of the driveway, I felt a sudden hollowness in my stomach, and the room began to spin. I reached out and held on to the edges of the bed, pressing my body down against the hard mattress, trying to bite back the nausea that was rising in my throat. In the first weeks after Anna left, Dan spent almost all his time at the station. He organized a full-scale search, even a television appeal, although we knew Anna hadn't been kidnapped. She had walked out on her own. She was 16, old enough to know what she wanted. When Dan did come home from the station he refused to sleep, instead pacing back and forth in the living room of our big house in the suburbs until he either dropped exhausted into an armchair, or grabbed his keys and drove off somewhere. He never told me where he went.

Six years and I was back here, full circle, only now it was Michael's footsteps on the floor below, his hand on the car door. I was filled with a rush of anger at Jill, for the selfish thing she had done in dying. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to sleep.

It was Jill I met first, before Michael. She was an executive assistant at the office supply company where I went to work after the divorce, the summer before last. Three days a week, doing typing and filing. "You've got a teaching degree," she said to me on my second day in the office. She'd seen my resume on her boss's desk. "You're over-qualified for this job. What are you doing here?"

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I was rinsing dishes in the office's tiny kitchen, waiting for the coffee to percolate. I handed her a mug. "Come on, there must be a reason," she tried again. And as I stood there, pouring the coffee, thinking I was going to be noncommittal, out it all came, the whole story, about Anna and Dan, and the divorce, which had only just been finalized, and my retreat to the little bungalow on the edge of town.

Jill waited, holding her coffee, nodding, not saying anything, not even looking embarrassed to be hearing all this from a complete stranger. When I'd finished, we sipped in silence for a few seconds, and then Jill put her hand on my arm and smiled. "I think you should come on a jump with me," she said.

That was how it started. Jill and I became friends. We started going out together, for lunch sometimes, driving down to one of the cheap cafes in town, or for a drink after work or on the weekends. She talked endlessly, telling me stories about her travels, her childhood, a string of jilted boyfriends. And skydiving.

Jill had been skydiving for nearly a year when I met her, every weekend, if the weather was good. She talked about as if it were a drug rather than a sport. "It's the most amazing thing," she said at lunch one day, not long after we met. We were sitting at the picnic table out behind the office, eating soggy sandwiches. "You don't feel like you're falling. It's hard to explain. You're up there, and the air's rushing past your ears and the ground's coming up at you, but you feel like you're floating. Like there's only you, in the whole world. You could go on forever."

"At least until it's time to open your parachute."

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“Skeptic.” She shook her head, wiping breadcrumbs from her lips. “You’ll never know what you’re missing unless you try it. You don’t want to be a groundhog forever.”

“Groundhog?”

“Groundhog. Civilian. Non-jumper.” Jill put her sandwich down and turned her head away, towards the parking lot. “Groundhogs are prisoners. They’re held down by gravity, trapped in their sad little lives. Every day is the same: get up, go to work, come home. They’re following the rules. They do what everyone else does, because they don’t know what else there is. Even worse, they don’t care.”

Over the weeks and months, as our friendship grew, I began to understand a little. We would sit at the picnic table, or amid the lunchtime clatter of a crowded restaurant, or in a smoky bar on a Saturday night, and I would watch Jill’s face as she described it for me: when the door of the plane finally opens and you reach out and there’s nothing there, that the sudden rush of feeling that makes you think anything might be possible. She swung her arms about as she talked, and her face took on a kind of glow, as though it was lit up from the inside. She became a new Jill, not the calm, unflappable Jill that I knew from the office, with her knee-length, sensible skirts and her long, brown hair tied back in a ponytail. When she talked about skydiving, she became someone else.

On a Saturday in September, three months after I met Jill, we stopped by her mother’s house on our way to town to do some shopping. And there he was, Michael,

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digging a new flowerbed in the front garden, bent over the spade, overalls covered in mud. “Michael, this is Sheila,” Jill said. Michael looked up, and a kind of jolt passed between us. I felt as if I’d been sleepwalking and had just woken up. I could feel the warm autumn sun on my back, and hear the rustle of the squirrels in the oak tree above us. Michael let go of the spade and it dropped, hitting Jill’s toe. “Shit,” she yelled, hopping about on one foot. “What’s the matter with you two?”

After Jill died, Michael and I went to clear out her apartment, and we found her skydiving gear stowed away in a cupboard. I stood in the light that poured in through her bedroom windows, and held the neon yellow jumpsuit up against my face. The fabric still smelled of her perfume. “We’ll give it to Goodwill,” said Michael, standing in the doorway holding a box of her books against his hip. “They’ll find someone who wants it.” But I shook my head. I knew then that I wanted to make a jump, at least once. To try. “No,” I said. “I’ll take it.”

Michael and I never argued, but he began to spend a lot more time in his gardens, and he refused to let me keep the skydiving gear in the house, so I had to store it at Dan’s place. Dan surprised me. I was sure he’d be furious at the idea of me doing something as dangerous as skydiving. As a police officer, he thinks it’s his sworn duty to protect everyone and everything, all the time. Even when he’s not working. Especially when he’s not working. That’s probably why it hurt him so much, when Anna left.

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The hardest thing for him, I think, was trying to figure out why. In his detective's brain, there always had to be a reason. Every act had its motive, every crime its starting point. Those were the principles he lived by. Then she left, and he spent months, years, combing through the things we'd done, decisions we'd made, arguments we'd had, trying to come up with a lead. In the end, he decided it was my fault. "You were too hard on her," he told me. "Smothering her. Never letting her do what she wanted."

Deep down, I think he might be right. I've had six years now to think about this; for the first two years it was almost all I thought about. A hundred disagreements, a thousand tiny hurts, the things I thought of as the normal tugs of a child growing up, testing her wings. But the arguments escalated, until it seemed like we were fighting all the time. The kids she hung out with, the parties, the worry about drugs and pregnancy. "Don't you trust me?" she shouted once, before stomping out. The truth was, I didn't. How could I, when there was so much danger? How could I stand by and watch her get hurt? Easier to keep her locked up with rules, expectations, disappointments. Define the boundaries. Hold her down. It was for her, not for me. For her good, to keep her safe.

But Anna was like a caged animal, I can see that now. She had too much spirit, she wasn't content to be a groundhog. And when she finally managed to break free, like Jill with her skydiving, she leapt out of the plane without looking back. Became someone new.

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“Are you sure about this Sheila? There are easier ways to kill yourself, you know.”

Dan’s voice was soft, his tone gently mocking. Yesterday afternoon, and he was sitting in my kitchen drinking warmed-over coffee. I was making my Saturday casserole, as usual. I’d called and asked him to bring the skydiving gear over, so I could get it ready.

“Seriously, Sheila,” Dan continued. “You will be careful, won’t you? I worry about you sometimes.” He got up and put on his jacket, which had been slung across the back of the chair, then walked across the cracked linoleum to the kitchen doorway. I followed him through the living room to the front door. He stood on the step for a moment, crossing his arms against the wind. Then he leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “Anyway, good luck.” I watched him walk away, his feet rustling through the dry leaves that littered the grass.

So here it is, the morning of my first jump. I’ve checked all the gear, packed it up carefully and stowed it in the trunk of my old hatchback. Now I’m sitting at my kitchen table, Michael is off working on some garden, wouldn’t talk to me this morning, wouldn’t look at me even. I’m sitting here alone, hands folded on the tabletop, thinking about Jill, and Anna. About Jill and the way she used life, chewed it up, gloried in it. About Anna, and the argument we had, the last one, the way we screamed at each other, using words like weapons, trying to wound. I see her standing there, in that other kitchen, hands on hips, thin body held so stiff, and I find myself wondering what she looks like now.

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I feel the tears coming, so I try to think instead about the jump, what it will be like when they open that door and the wind rushes in. I hear Jill's voice, telling me that we're all prisoners in one way or another, that we have to find our own ways to break free. And as I get up from the table to go out to the car, I feel lighter somehow, as though the weight of the world has already slipped from my shoulders.

(3,988 words)