

BERKELEY

FEBRUARY 2009

THE cat spotted the fledgling first and dropped into a crouch. Though the tabby was old and arthritic and hadn't caught anything in years, Danni scooped her up and brought her inside. When she returned, the bird bobbed along the walkway, away from her. It was a freshly fledged mourning dove—plump, scaly, granite-grey, lacking the sleek iridescence of an adult.

She scanned the yard. The hanging planter used for a nest was empty. Where were the parents? They should be nearby, ready to feed and defend. She didn't see or hear them. The dove shuddered its feathers as if trying to shake itself into the air. It took a few tipsy steps and sunk into the mulch.

“I won't hurt you,” she said.

Odds were against the bird, especially if it couldn't leave the ground. If she could get closer, she could see if it was sick or injured, return it to the planter if need be, out of harm's way.

They came to a brief standoff under the cedar, Danni's heart thrashing as if she were the vulnerable one. The young dove ducked into a bush and she knew.

She wasn't pregnant, and even if she were the baby would not stick.



The following morning Danni was up and out of the house early for morning rounds. A recently spayed tuxedo cat on Grizzly Peak Boulevard whose owners were in the Galapagos. Two calicos and a Maine Coon in Kensington. She only took care of cats—a niche she'd accidentally carved, having discovered that clients like a specialist and that cat owners are usually generous.

When she arrived at the Coon's house there was a present for her on the front stoop, the soft, purple remainder of the previous night's hunt. The cat had access to the house through a pet door in the kitchen. He was inside, coiled on a pile of dirty laundry. He abandoned his food after a few desultory licks and sat in her lap, a purring cold-blooded killer. At the calico's, an indoor hidey cat whose owners would return that evening, she fed, scooped, and left an invoice. By ten in the morning, she was back home.

Ethan's truck was gone—February was a slow season for both of them, but some big winds had alerted Ethan's clients to the top-heavy trees in their midst. She stood under the deodar, looking for the dove. That the bird had survived the night of prowling cats and raccoons seemed unlikely. She ought to have been able to protect something so defenseless. She would have expected nothing in return—not loyalty or even gratitude—unlike with people, whose relationships were subject to tests of reciprocity.

An old man walking past stopped at the foot of the driveway. "The tree is dancing with your house," he said with the trace of an eastern European accent.

"Actually it's not my house," she said. She and Ethan rented the in-law unit in back.

The man reminded her of a professor she once knew, always ready with an observation. His head craned up at the canopy, he either didn't hear Danni or ignored her. "You hope it

doesn't hurt, the tree so close," he said. "Sometimes you fall in love, and then you have problems."

A trio of cyclists streamed by, shouting in conversation. A bus chortled up the hill in the opposite direction. A hired gardener fired up a leaf-blower. The neighbor-philosopher wandered off into the noisy world with a wave, leaving Danni alone. The rest of the day stretched before her, a vast, indulgent green. Her nurse had suggested museums or the symphony to distract her from the ruthless tedium of the ten or so days after embryo transfer—*Do something special, make a date with yourself or a friend*. After weeks of prescriptions and prohibitions, she was supposed to be still and wait—like an out-of-service vending machine, shelves full of untouchable refreshment. A long walk in the park or a bike ride in the hills would've soothed, but exercise was off limits. She wasn't supposed to let her heart rate rise or tax her mind. She was simply to wait, bloated and weepy, not hoping too much or too little.

She sorted through the mail: a flyer for solar panel installation, a rundown of recent sales from a local real estate agent, a reminder postcard from her dentist's office. And then she saw the small envelope with the Wyoming stamp and handwriting familiar enough that she tore it open.

*Dear Danni,*

*I only just now found your address, and I pray this makes it into your hands before next weekend. I'm writing from Jackson, where family is gathering at Mira's grave. This spring, we'll move her closer to us. It would be good to have you. Marley will be here—she'll be twenty in May! I have news I'd prefer to share in person. Will you come? Please?*

*Justine*

*P.S. I've been reading Mira's journals. I'm enclosing a page that may give you some idea how she felt back then.*

Danni met Mira when they were thirteen, though Mira turned fourteen a month later. She was the first person Danni loved who she wasn't born into loving, the friend who knew her best until one day, it seemed Mira didn't know her at all. Mira was always smiling her way into or out of trouble, a smile that was a little large for her face. Part of its dazzle was its disproportion. It beckoned like a car door opened to offer a ride. The last thing she'd done in her life was offer a ride. She was murdered at twenty-two years old, in a moment of self-assertion that backfired.

Countless times, Danni had imagined herself into Mira's car at that moment—not the VW bug, which smelled of caramel and old leather and beach sand, but some unremarkable sedan Mira drove temporarily. It had been so long and still the word *murder* seemed wrong—tawdry, yet oddly formal. Where there's murder, there's necessarily a murderer. Attention gets misspent. People ask: *Did they catch him? Is he locked up?* Yes, Danni would reassure, but as of that spring, she'd no longer be afforded the slight comfort of justice. In April, he'd be free. The prosecutor had accurately predicted that with good behavior Jarvis would only serve half his sentence. A thirty-five year term was split in half from the start.

Danni's life was split, too, into *before* and *after*. Whenever she imagined the scene of Mira's murder, it was always through Jarvis's perspective that she saw Mira, in the driver's seat, an expression of horrible recognition on her face that no amount of swerving could help. It was a look Danni had seen once before.

Danni tipped her chin to her right shoulder to stretch an old, recurrent ache on the left side of her neck. The pain started a few months after Mira was killed. Then an impatient driver in

a tractor trailer failed to see Danni's turn signal and rear-ended her on a two-lane road, causing the kind of soft tissue damage that doesn't show on x-rays but never quite heals. Danni had learned to manage the pain—picking center theater seats, not sitting still for too long—but sometimes it couldn't be avoided. Sometimes nothing helped once the pain had established itself.

She read the note again several times through, but her questions only grew more insistent. Why would Justine want to move her daughter's grave when she knew Mira wanted to be buried in Jackson, her family's summer home? She'd refused to bury Mira in River Bend, where she was killed. Mira always said the only good thing the Indiana town had going for it was Orange Julius and nearby Lake Michigan and Danni, in ascending order.

Why, after all this time, would Justine reach out to Danni, of Mira's many friends, and invite her to gather with family? The funeral in River Bend was followed by a burial in Jackson that Danni didn't attend, for reasons far less compelling now than at the time. The truth was, she didn't want to see Mira buried. She didn't yet understand how important it would be later to have done so, and no one told her otherwise. She'd kept in touch diligently with Justine for a few years after Mira's death, but over time the letters and phone calls had tapered until they stopped completely.

What was Justine's news?

And Marley. Lurching between the hope and despair of another two-week wait, Danni wasn't sure how she felt about the prospect of meeting the child Mira gave away. Marley was two days old the day Mira signed the adoption papers. The adoption was open. There was never meant to be any mystery for Marley about her biological mother, nor for Mira about the life of her biological child. But then Mira was killed when Marley was only three. Whether that had loosened the tether to Mira's family or tightened it, Danni didn't know. Had Marley maintained a

connection with Justine? Had she made contact with her birthfather? Would she want to meet Danni? Or were all of them strangers to her, inhabitants of the life she didn't have? Did Marley know that Mira and Danni stopped talking to each other not long after she was born?

Before unfolding the page from Mira's journal, Danni paused, noting the three dark circles that had bound the original in a notebook, the coil of the spine. Mira's handwriting was like her mother's, slanted and loose, as if she'd inherited the way of leaning into meaning. She'd had to switch pens halfway through, from blue to black ink. There were scribbles in the margins where she'd tried to coax the ink to run. The entry, dated August 15, 1991, began:

*Write about my strengths? Ha! Here goes...*

*You can turn the tables on me and I never panic.*

*I'd do anything for my friends and I hate letting them down—but I've been into a lot of that lately.*

*I'm an accomplished liar, but that's not exactly a strength is it?*

*Danni won't forgive me. I don't blame her. My mom says I just have to give her time but if I saw myself walking down the street, I'd cross to the other side. She'll want an explanation. She'll ask questions and want it to make sense. But it won't make sense. I can't explain it to myself. That's the best I can offer, and it's not enough.*

*Maybe in twenty years we'll look back and laugh. All will be plain and clear. All will be forgiven. I don't deserve that, but she does.*

“It's one thing to dig a body up to confirm a new lead in a cold case, but this case was closed ages ago,” said Ethan. “To move her seems bizarre to me.”

Danni set down the Japanese paring knife she'd used to slice cucumbers. Her husband picked it up to quarter a lime for his drink, made with a local gin he loved that actually tasted of juniper berry. "I know," she said.

"Why not just be buried in Jackson beside her? Presumably they bought more than one plot. And I mean, will there even be anything left to *move*?" Ethan reached into the icebox, scooped up a handful of cubes and filled a glass. He squeezed two lime wedges over the ice, poured the gin, then the tonic, stirred the drink with his finger. He filled a glass with sparkling water, no ice but with lime, and handed it to Danni.

"It *is* strange," she said. "She chose Jackson."

Mira had known exactly where she wanted to be buried and declared her desire to Danni before she had a driver's license. That she was a minor at the time didn't invalidate her choice. In Mira's case she'd already lived three-quarters of her life. Mira was capable of whims. She was impulsive. She wasn't one to do or say the thing expected of her, which as a teenager would be to not believe in death, least of all her own. But it seemed a desecration to dig up her remains and take them to Colorado where she'd never even lived. The Pauls had moved to Colorado, near Justine's sister, not long after the murder.

Danni fanned the half-moons of cucumbers on the salad. "I want to go."

"So you can talk them out of it?"

She gave Ethan a look: *Yeah, right, because I'm so persuasive*. Once she'd wrestled with her own ambiguity over whether she wanted to be a mother, it had taken her a couple more years to convince Ethan they ought to try. First she'd wanted to want a baby the way so many women did—without falter. Then she'd wanted the two of them to want one together. Maybe she'd waited too long.



“Have you even been to her grave before?”

She shook her head. It didn't matter much to her where Mira was buried. The point was it had mattered to Mira. *Maybe in twenty years we'll look back and laugh.* Seventeen had come and gone since Mira was killed, eighteen since they'd last spoken. Was it true that she'd only needed time?

“I thought you weren't supposed to travel,” said Ethan.

She'd been discouraged from making unnecessary trips. But this wasn't unnecessary.

“They don't want me to fly. They're concerned about air pressure changes or something”—a risk the purveyors of reproductive technology hadn't quantified and therefore couldn't rule out. “By land is fine,” she said.

“You're going to drive fifteen hours? What about the fact that you may be pregnant?”

*May* be. Likely wasn't.

“Don't you have an appointment already for the test?”

“I can get a pregnancy test in Jackson. There's a hospital there.” Where Mira gave birth.

“The ground will be frozen until spring. You could go then, before—”

“And if there's a baby?” she asked. It wasn't a fair question, since her hopes were so low. She didn't feel like she had when she'd made it to eight weeks. She didn't need to pee every hour or nap all afternoon.

Ethan sighed. “Then we'll have a happy problem.” He put his hand on Danni's arm. His fingers were cool from the drink, and she flinched. “Do you really think this is a good idea, now, after everything you've been through?”

He was right to question. She'd drawn the line herself at the outset. If she didn't get pregnant—and stay pregnant—this time, their third, she'd give up. There was a dull comfort in

knowing it would be over, one way or another. Why not find out in Jackson? Mira had gone straight there when she discovered she was pregnant to sort out what to do. *The mountains don't pick sides*, she told Danni. Certainly showing up in Jackson would serve Danni better than the treacle of affirmations her well-meaning acupuncturist suggested she recite: *I release my doubts and fears and open to trust and love. I accept the gift of life within myself*. And if she was already pregnant, her work, with its abundance of toxoplasmosis-carrying cat poop, was arguably more dangerous than a road trip.

“I don't expect you to understand,” she said. “But I need to go.”

She'd lost Mira in the middle of an argument, so with Ethan, she'd had to learn that love could survive two people standing their ground. Ethan had been the one to suggest they include the willingness to fight in their wedding vows, knowing love benefits from a confrontation now and then, just as trees thrive from periodic pruning. But Ethan never knew Mira. He couldn't see that since this rift would never be set right in person, it had to be settled in place.

He hugged her from behind, his chin tucked into the crook of her neck. He smelled, as he often did after work, like pine and bay laurel. “You know, Mira's not in Jackson. She hasn't been there for a long time.” He stacked his hands over her belly.

*Nothing there, either.*

“Didn't Dr. Ness say to keep things quiet, to conserve your energy?”

She could fill an ocean with the advice she'd received. Babies were born in wartime, in filth and poverty, to parents who didn't want them or couldn't love them well. If parenthood were based on merit, there'd be a lot fewer people on this earth. But Danni had repeatedly failed to conceive a child under ideal conditions. No one could say precisely why. In her heart she

suspected she had it coming. Her own mother's miscarriages didn't mitigate the sense that she'd brought this incompetence upon herself. A punishment.

She'd meant to hurt Mira, too. Soon Mira's murderer would be released to make room for the freshly guilty. But who would take this old remorse from her and declare her time served?

"Please," she said. "Just come with me, Eth. Don't try to talk me out of it. I can't sit here, I can't—" She paused. *I can't wait here to fail yet again.*

A pinch deep in her belly caused her to draw a sharp breath.

Ethan dropped his hands. "What is it?"

She couldn't say. No one could know what was happening inside her now, but Mira would have understood her fear that what she had to offer wasn't nearly enough.

Danni called Nan, a pet-sitter friend, to arrange coverage for her jobs, a light load since it was February—just the Maine Coon and the tuxedo. She emailed her clients that she had to leave suddenly to attend a funeral. She met Nan at the Curran Trail in Tilden to give her the keys.

"Walk with us?" Nan had her canine posse—a standard poodle, a Jack Russell, and an assortment of mutts.

"Better not. Cramps," said Danni. A white lie was preferable to becoming the object of constant sympathy.

Nan sighed supportively, though she herself was in her late fifties, through with all of that. Her kids were grown—two boys in their 30's, one married. She whistled the dogs back from the creek. The mutts circled Danni, sniffing.

What did they sense drifting off of her skin? A scent imperceptible to humans, if pulled through a dog's nose, could unpack history. Cats were no slouches by comparison, perhaps even more finely attuned, since they used their olfactory talents not so much to detect danger as to claim relationships and protect territory. One of Danni's regular charges, a yellow-eyed black cat named Prudence, stuck close during her brief pregnancy a year ago rather than darting to the sliding glass door, lobbying to be let out.

"I'll check in if I have any questions. Ethan's going with?" said Nan, keeping an eye on the dogs as they got acquainted with another dog at the trailhead, sniffing and chasing tail.

Danni nodded. "He thinks it's weird, though, the whole grave-moving."

"I might have said that too before my father's memorial."

The remains of Nan's father, a WWII pilot, had been returned to the family a few months before—gold watch, dog tags, jumble of bones. Fifty years after he disappeared, he was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery with a flag-draped coffin and 21-gun salute.

"I didn't think I'd go for the military fanfare. I live in the town that voted to initiate impeachment proceedings for Bush's fraudulent war," said Nan. "I don't remember my father. But that ceremony—all these people who didn't even know him, paying their respects—it totally got me. I felt the closest to him I've ever felt, and proud. The bravery, the sacrifice—all stuff I thought I didn't even believe in."

They left Berkeley a few days later, plum trees raining the first purple blossoms. Ethan tugged at the mounts on the ski rack the way he did his harness before climbing a tree with his

pruning tools—a routine vigilance. His skis were in the rack. His Skarpa boots hung around his neck.

He'd asked if she minded if he brought his gear. Of course not, she'd said. She couldn't ski but that shouldn't stop him. Playing together was part of the reason they hadn't gotten around to baby-making earlier, when she'd believed it was up to her to decide.

“Got everything?” Ethan asked, meaning warmth, wind and waterproof layers. He'd already checked the weather and reported gleefully that it was snowing and fifteen degrees in Jackson.

She nodded.

“What's that?” Ethan asked, pointing to the black leather-bound sketchbook under her arm.

She'd started the journal shortly after Mira was killed, when she first noticed birds flying into peril. She hadn't written in it in years. The first page had a title, *The Fowles of Heaven*, taken from a book written by an English parson in the seventeenth century, when people still lived by signs and superstitions, when you could call a book *The Fowles of Heaven or History of Birdes*, and no one would expect you to pick one or the other: history or heaven.

In Danni's *Fowles of Heaven*, each bird had its own page and a paragraph or two describing its unnatural demise, usually the result of a collision with the built world. The slender Egret flattened on the roadside, mash of bridal white feathers and blood. The Northern Flicker found in a Tahoe lodge, beneath the skylight it tried to fly through. It was trapped inside long enough to shred a box of tissues. The Grackle, the Black-headed Grosbeak, the Cormorant. She hadn't looked for these birds. They came to her like letters from the beyond. One day she began to record them.

Getting into the car, she scanned the bushes for the dove even as she did not expect to see the bird. She'd looked for the fledgling every day since the botched rescue. She'd kept on looking long after she'd given up hope.