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Something Like That

The Post called it “an ill-fated accident with a ceiling tile.” The university called it “a devastating blow to the philosophy department.” My mother called it “an opportunity for closure.”

I came downstairs Tuesday morning to find my mom sitting at the kitchen table, crying.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I pulled a cereal bowl out of the cabinet.

“Trent, honey, come sit down.”

I poured myself a bowl of Cheerios and sat across from her. She had two pages from *The Denver Post Online* on the table.

“Brace yourself,” she said.

“Just tell me,” I said, between mouthfuls of cereal. She slid the pages towards me. I glanced at them and looked back at her.

“Your father died yesterday.”

I picked up the first page. The headline read, “Professor Dies in Tragic Accident.” I started reading. *Professor of philosophy, Franklin Garret, died yesterday in an ill-fated accident with a ceiling tile. The esteemed professor was teaching his freshman ethics class when the tile came loose and struck him in the head... He was pronounced dead by paramedics on the scene.* I picked up the other page. It had a picture of the hole that was left in the ceiling.

My mother came around the table and held me like I should be hysterical.

“The funeral is on Thursday,” she said as she let me go. I just nodded. “You can take the car.”

“What?”

“You’ll drive down tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“He’s your father. You’re going to his funeral.”

I stared at her and picked up my spoon. “My cereal is getting soggy.”

“I know it’s a lot to absorb right now. But you need closure.” She walked out of the room.

The Cheerios were soft and bloated with milk. I dumped them down the garbage disposal.

My mom stood in the doorway of my room later that night, car

keys dangling from her right hand.

“What about school?” I asked.

“I already called your teachers.”

“What about your work?”

“I’ll take the bus. It drops me two blocks away from the hospital.”

I didn’t move. I lay on the bed staring out the window. “Can I have money for a hotel?”

“You can stay with Uncle Jody. I’ll give you some money for gas and food.”

“What if I never come back?”

She set the keys on my dresser and left.

I waited until I heard her bedroom door shut. I got up, dug my blue duffel out of the closet and started packing. I only had one suit. It was almost black, and the legs and sleeves were about half an inch too short.

I fell asleep face down that night. I dreamt I was the one who threw the ceiling tile all the way from Helena and hit Franklin Garret in the head. I told everyone at the funeral, but they all said no one could throw anything that far. I picked up a wine glass and threw it. It hit my cousin Zach in the kneecap. He lives in Tallahassee.

My mom woke me up at 5:45, as darkness loosened its grip on the morning. My throat felt dry and my eyes were tired. I brought my hand to my bottom lip and wiped the white film off with my index finger.

“I have to be at work by six-thirty,” my mom said, poking her head through the doorway.

“I thought you were taking the bus.” My voice sounded scratchy; I cleared my throat.

“You can take me today. You have to get an early start.”

Lying in bed for a few minutes, I swallowed to get the sour taste out of my mouth. I sat up and planted my feet on the carpet. I remembered sitting in the same position a few years earlier, before the growth spurt. My feet dangled over the edge, toes brushing the tops of the carpet threads.

“It’s good to be tall,” my mom said. “Tall people get better jobs.” At 5’6” she had to tilt her head back slightly to look into my face. “And handsome people, too.” She reached her hand toward my cheek.

“That’s just something short, ugly people say.” I brushed by her before she could touch my face.

At 6’4” I had a spot as forward on the varsity basketball team. Coach said he thought I would grow more, said he would keep his fingers crossed. On the team roster I was 6’6”, but I stopped growing by the end of sophomore year. With basketball shoes on, I was six foot four and a half.

“Here are the directions to Jody’s place and directions to the Temple.” We stood in the kitchen, my bag on the floor next to me.

“Temple? Was he Muslim or something?”

“His family is Jewish. Real reform though.” I snatched the paper out of her hand.

“I’m half-Jewish?”

“Drive safely. Don’t pick up any hitchhikers. Keep an eye on the gauge; don’t run out of gas. If you feel tired, stop and take a nap. I don’t want you falling asleep at the wheel.”

“We are the chosen people,” I said loudly and pounded my fist against my chest.

“Here’s some money.” She held out three hundred dollars.

“I always knew Jesus was a fake. I guess it was just in my blood.”

She set the money on the counter. “I made you a peanut butter sandwich for lunch and there are some snacks in here.” She set down a paper grocery bag. “There’s some Coke in there to keep you awake.”

“You owe me seventeen years of Chanukah gifts.”

“Call me when you get to Jody’s.”

“Eight gifts a year for seventeen years...that’s a hundred and thirty-six gifts.”

“You can drive back Friday or Saturday. Just call and tell me which.”

“I’ll make a list of what I want,” I said.

She leaned in to hug me and I let her.

I threw my duffel into the trunk of the Taurus and put the paper bag in the back seat.

“Do you have your wallet?” my mom asked, standing in the driveway. It was early October and the morning air was crisp.

She barely shivered.

“Yeah.”

“Do you have your suit?”

“Yeah, I got everything,” I said. “Let’s go.” I slammed the trunk, got into the driver’s seat and started the car.

She climbed in, clutching her purse in her lap.

I shifted the car into drive and pulled away. I watched the townhouse get smaller in my mirror and then disappear around a corner. My mom turned the heat on and rubbed her hands together like she was in front of a fire.

“I feel really lucky to have you as a son.” She was trying to have a profound moment with me, the kind she could tell her friends about, the kind that made her feel like a good mom.

“I think we’re really lucky to have each other,” she continued when I said nothing. “It’s not...”

“Which side of the hospital?” I asked.

She sighed. “The main entrance,” she said looking out the window.

I turned into St. Peter’s driveway and stopped in front of the sliding doors.

“This is going to be good for you.” Without a response she would never get out.

“Yeah.”

She patted my thigh, opened the door and walked into the hospital. The doors closed automatically behind her. I turned onto Cedar Street, toward the highway.

I took Highway 12 toward 287. I thought about Jake Neilson. He was in a head-on crash a year before right along this stretch of highway. They said he was trying to pass a semi. He survived, but he couldn’t tell them what happened; he was too busy relearning how to walk.

There wasn’t a car in front of me, but I swerved across the double yellow, just to see what it was like. The road took a sharp curve; I stayed in the left lane. I came to a stretch of straight highway. A black SUV crested the horizon. I stayed for a moment, and then slowly drifted back over the line.

It’s an eleven-hour drive from Helena to Boulder. Wyoming is just in the way. When I merged onto I-90 I set the cruise control ten miles per hour above the speed limit. I opened the glove

compartment and fished for a tape. The only one I found was yellowed with age. It was a Disney tape I listened to as a kid. It had people like Bruce Springsteen singing their versions of songs like “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” I drove twenty minutes in silence before I decided to play it.

I had been to Colorado once before. The year Uncle Jody decided I needed a father figure right after he lost his job at the DMV, and subsequently his apartment. We drove to Boulder and picked him up. I was thirteen at the time. He lived across the hall from me for six months and left long hairs in the shower. “Never apologize to a woman,” he told me, “then they have your balls right where they want them.”

Most nights it was just my mom and me with Jody wandering home in the middle of the night or late the next morning. Privacy never made sense to him. When I was in the bathroom, he would just walk in. He wouldn’t even knock. “We’re all people,” he would say.

Once, I was unzipping when he walked in. He started shaving, so I buttoned my pants. But he wouldn’t let me leave, not until I peed in front of him. “We can’t be afraid of each other’s cocks.” Those were the kinds of lessons I could never learn from my mom, he said.

“Helena just doesn’t have the energy Boulder does,” he told me one Sunday morning, while we brushed our teeth side by side, making eye contact in the mirror. A few weeks later a friend of a friend found him a job and he moved back to Boulder.

I drove through Billings at 9:45. I hated Billings. I stayed there for a basketball tournament my freshman year. The motel room smelled like old vase water and the sheets made me itch for two days. I sped up to ninety miles per hour until I couldn’t see it in my rear view mirror.

I saw a picture of my dad once. He was tall, with dark hair and a puffy face. My mom said I couldn’t contact him until I was eighteen; she said it was part of the rules. She sent him a letter a few weeks before my seventeenth birthday. She said the sperm bank never told her she couldn’t contact him before I was eighteen. Plus, he was an adult; if he didn’t want to write her back he didn’t have to.

He was a professor at Metro State, he told her. He married,

divorced, and had two kids in college on the East coast. He sent a picture of himself; my mom sent him my basketball picture. He told her he looked forward to hearing from me.

I wondered what his last thought was right before he died. I wondered if he heard the tile come loose, if anyone in the class yelled out. I wondered if he put my picture in a drawer and forgot about it, or if he hung it up on the fridge, or if he framed it and put it on his desk. Or maybe he just looked at it and threw it away.

I drank a can of soda and had to stop in Buffalo, Wyoming to pee and get gas. It was almost noon, so I ate at the Pizza Hut on Hart Street. The only other people in there were a family of five. The little boy and girl were already pale and round like their parents. The baby was well on its way. The dad wore denim overalls and a cut-off t-shirt. His gut made it hard for him to sit close to the table. The mom was at least three hundred pounds. They were the type of people my mom called Bohemians.

I was back on the road by twelve thirty. I thought about what the funeral would be like while I listened to Bob Dylan's rendition of "This Old Man." Just outside of Casper, in the distance, someone stood on the side of the road. As I got closer I realized it was a hitchhiker, a woman. She had a faded green duffel and a baggy red canvas coat. I slowed down, pulled off the road and rolled down the passenger side window.

"You're just a kid," she said as she leaned down and looked in at me. She couldn't have been more than twenty-three. "Where're you headed?"

"Boulder."

She just stared at me for a moment. Then she picked up her bag, opened the door and threw the duffel into the back seat.

"Are you going to rob me?" I asked when she sat down.

"Are you going to rape me?"

I looked at her face and pulled onto the highway.

She had reddish-brown hair and she reminded me of Alexa Figley, the second girl I ever kissed: the same wide jaw, same rounded nose.

We rode for several minutes in silence, spare the sound of the grey asphalt coming up to meet the tires.

"So why are you going to Boulder?" she asked.

"To visit my uncle."

She nodded like she already knew.

“What about you?”

“I need a change of scenery.”

“I can see why,” I said. There was nothing for miles. There weren’t any curves in the road as far as I could see. “I bet I could fall asleep at the wheel and we’d both be okay.”

She smiled. Her teeth were perfect, except her canines looked too pointed.

A few minutes of silence went by. The tape still played, but the volume was so low, it blended in with the murmur of the tires.

“I’m Devin,” she said. She had a wildness hidden behind her eyes.

“Trent.”

“Where are you from?” I couldn’t tell if she was just making conversation or if she wanted to know.

“Helena.”

“Hmm.” She stared out her window. “How do you like it there?”

“It’s alright,” I said. “Helena’s quaint in a depressing sort of way. Everyone wants to pretend it has the small town thing going for it.”

“But it doesn’t?” She cocked her head to the side.

“No. It just feels neglected.”

She drummed her fingers on her thigh. They were long and thin, but strong. “I’m from Portland, originally.”

I could feel she was looking at me, but I kept my eyes on the road.

“How do you think your mom would feel about you picking up a hitchhiker from Portland?”

“I don’t care what she thinks,” I said a little too defensively.

Devin smiled like she was in on something I would never understand. She rolled down her window. Her hair blew in every direction. I glanced over.

“So, Devin,” I yelled over the wind. “Who do you know in Boulder?”

“I guess now when I get there,” she was yelling too, “I’ll know you.”

Something about the way she said it made me feel warm.

After a half hour or so, she rolled up her window. The quiet sounded strange after the violent wind.

“So is your uncle your mom’s or dad’s brother?” she asked.

“Mom’s. Never knew my dad.”

“So they were divorced?”

“No. They were never married.” I wanted to touch her.

I moved to the left lane and passed a purple minivan.

“What about your parents?”

“Divorced.” She reached out her hand and turned the volume up. “What is this?” she asked. The voice of Paul McCartney singing “The Ballad of Davy Crockett” filled the car.

“It’s from when I was a kid.” I switched it to radio and hit scan. There was static for a moment, before it stopped on a scratchy country station.

“I hate country,” she said and hit *Tape*. “Let’s listen to this.”

“I can kick you out of the car.” I hit the FM button.

“But you won’t.” Davy Crockett came back on.

I clenched my jaw and reached towards the radio. She grabbed my hand and gently pulled it back. She set it down and left her hand on top of it. I swallowed hard. “Davy Crockett” ended and we listened to the sound of the space in between songs. Her hand was warm and strong. Little Richard’s voice broke the silence. She picked up her hand and turned the volume up a little. My hand was cold and tingly without hers.

“Itsy Bitsy Spider” blasted through the speakers. “This is great,” she said. I couldn’t help but smile.

We crossed the border into Colorado at four ‘o clock. I stopped to get gas at a Conoco in Fort Collins. Devin bought Twizzlers when she went in to go to the bathroom. I called Jody from the payphone on the west side of the building, to tell him I was close. He sounded high on his answering machine.

The highway was busier than any highways in Montana or Wyoming.

“Where are you staying in Boulder?” I asked.

“I’ll make some calls when I get there.”

“My uncle probably won’t mind if you need to stay at his place.”

She smiled, like there was nothing I could tell her that she didn’t already know.

We took the exit onto 119 and got into town at quarter ‘til six. I pulled out the directions my mom gave me.

“I’ll read them to you,” Devin said and grabbed for them.

“No, I got it,” I switched them to my left hand and held them next to the steering wheel.

Jody’s house was between Canyon Boulevard and Pearl Street.

“Look for 601,” I said.

“It’s back that way,” she said and gestured behind us.

“You sure?” I asked, but I was already pulling into a driveway to turn around.

I drove a couple blocks then I parked in front of 601 Walnut Street.

I knocked on the door, no answer. I knocked again, this time louder and longer, nothing.

“I don’t think he’s home,” Devin said.

I knocked one more time. “Jody,” I yelled.

“Are you sure this is his place?” she asked.

“If no one’s answering, it’s probably his place.”

“Let me see those.” She snatched the directions out of my hand. As she stared at the paper, wisps of hair fell into her face. She tucked them behind her ears without looking up. “What’s Temple Emmanuel?”

“A Jewish church.”

“A synagogue?” She said slowly and tilted her head.

“Yeah.”

“Why do you have directions to a synagogue?”

“Maybe I’m Jewish.”

She shifted her weight onto her right leg and stared at me, raising her eyebrows enough to show she didn’t believe me.

“I have to go to a funeral.” The word was heavy.

She held the directions out to me. “Well, I don’t want you to get lost.”

I folded them and stuffed them in my back pocket.

“Let’s get some food.” She smiled and leaned close to me.

I locked the car and we walked to the Pearl Street Mall. It reminded me of the outdoor mall in downtown Helena, except there were people. Groups of hippies sat on the benches with worn backpacks and scruffy dogs. Kids my age skateboarded, weaving between people and jumping off at the last second. College students sat on the restaurant patios, drinking dark beer. In Helena there were never more than eleven people walking the mall at any given time on a weekday; usually nine of them were over forty.

I followed Devin into Illegal Pete's on Pearl Street and Fifteenth. Loud music. Dim lighting. Low ceiling. It was grungy in that hip sort of way.

"You hungry?" she asked. I nodded.

I ordered a steak burrito; she got chicken. I paid with a fifty.

We sat outside, on the edge of a big wooden flowerbed, under a maple tree. The sun shone through the branches. The light moved with the breeze.

"Whose funeral?" A patch of light lingered in her hair.

"My father's."

She took a bite and stared at me. The wind blew, leaves fluttered and the sun changed her left eye from brown to gold. "You said you never met him."

"I haven't."

She rolled her eyes and tucked her hair behind her ear.

When we finished our burritos, we strolled back up the mall.

Jody's door was open when we got back to his house. I knocked and walked in. Devin followed.

"Jody," I yelled.

"Hey little man," he came down the stairs. He hadn't shaved in a few days. He had skinny limbs, but a round face. "How you doing?" He nudged me with his shoulder and then wrapped me in a loose hug.

"Alright," I said. I backed up a step. "This is Devin." I gestured towards her.

"You didn't tell me you were bringing anyone." He smiled; his teeth were yellow around the edges. "I'm Jody, Trent's coolest uncle." He held out his hand to her.

"Devin." She shook it.

"He's my only uncle."

"You guys are at the top of the stairs on the left. I'm going out to take care of some stuff, but I'll be ready by eleven tomorrow," Jody said.

"What?" I asked

"Your mom said I should probably go to the funeral with you. She said you would need someone there."

"I'll go with him," Devin said. I didn't look at her. I just nodded at Jody.

"Alright." He looked at me, then at her and back at me. "If you need anything let me know." He started towards the door. I

followed, leaving Devin in the hallway.

“Thanks, Jody,” I said as he opened the door. He reached in his pocket and held something out to me.

He slipped it into my hand. “Have a good night,” he said and shut the door behind him.

I put the condom in my pocket.

“I need a shower,” Devin said when we got to the top of the stairs. She set her duffel in the room with the fold-out couch and found the bathroom down the hall. “Can I use the towels in here?” she asked through a cracked door.

I found a stack in the hallway closet. “You probably want to use this,” I said and held the towel in front of the bathroom door. The water was running. I knocked. “I got you a towel,” I said loudly. The door opened; I glimpsed a patch of skin. Then her bare arm reached out.

“Thanks.” Her pinky brushed my knuckle as she took the towel from me. I saw her naked stomach as she pulled it into the bathroom, just before she shut the door.

“Need anything else?” I asked.

I heard the shower door close.

I went back to the bedroom. I closed my eyes and listened to the water. I didn’t want to hear it anymore so I slammed the bedroom door and started to disassemble the couch. Stacking the striped pillows in the corner, I thought about the ceiling tiles in the bathroom. Once the couch was bare, I grabbed the metal handle and pulled the mattress out. I unfolded it all the way and lay down. The metal bar across the middle stuck into my back. I rolled onto my side and it was less noticeable. The shower stopped. I went back to the hallway closet and got sheets for the bed. I heard the shower door slide open, heard her bare feet on the tile floor.

I had the bottom sheet on and was unfolding the top when Devin opened the door. Her hair was wet and she was wearing baggy athletic shorts and a plain black t-shirt. I could tell she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“I think I left you some hot water,” she said.

“Thanks.” I slipped past her through the doorway, grabbed a towel from the closet and closed the bathroom door behind me.

Walking into the bathroom felt like putting on a shirt straight

from the dryer. The steam held Devin's scent, soapy and familiar, reminding me of my first kiss, when I realized how someone's tongue could taste so foreign, yet so similar to my own. I could taste her as I breathed in the moisture. I turned the water on as hot as it would go and stepped in. It burned my skin. I let the water run down my face and over my closed eyes. I thought about Devin and considered masturbating. I tried to picture her naked, but the only image that came into my head was the picture of the hole in the ceiling. I rubbed the water from my eyes and looked up, but the ceiling was only drywall. I thought about the picture of my father, sitting at his desk, staring at something the camera couldn't see. I washed my hair and got out and wrapped the towel around my waist.

"I need clothes out of my bag," I said when I walked into the bedroom with just a towel on.

Devin was lying on the bed. She didn't even look up.

I held the towel up with my left hand and unzipped the bag with my right. I grabbed the first pair shorts I saw and the white Nike t-shirt next to them. I took them into the bathroom with me. This time it was easy; I masturbated into the toilet with little effort. I put on my clothes and returned to the bedroom.

"This is so uncomfortable," she said and squirmed. The way she moved made me want to grab her hips.

"Sorry." I dug the suit out of my duffel and hung it on the doorknob. "Do you want me to sleep on the floor?" I knew it was the right thing to say.

"It'd probably be just as comfortable." She grinned.

"You don't have to come tomorrow."

"I know." She turned her eyes towards me. "I don't have anything black, except this."

I looked at her t-shirt. "We'll figure something out."

I fell asleep quickly. I woke in the middle of the night with Devin's arms wrapped around my stomach. I felt her hips against mine. I pulled away gently, but her hands wouldn't let go.

"What are you doing?" she whispered in the dark.

"What are you doing?" I asked. She moved her hips close to me again.

"I'm sorry about your dad." She reached her hand around and rested it on my thigh. I could smell her hair.

I turned over, lay on my back. She nestled herself close to me and laid her head on my chest. Her right hand drifted down to my waist and lingered. I clenched my jaw.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“What are you doing?”

“Is something wrong?”

I breathed out forcefully and stared at the ceiling. She ran her fingers along the top of my shorts. I reached across my body and grabbed her breast, then dug my thumb under her collarbone and rolled on top of her.

“It’s okay,” she whispered into my ear. The darkness made her feel far away.

I used the back of the couch for leverage, squeezed so hard my knuckles hurt. She breathed heavily, but didn’t make any other noise. Her forehead brushed against my chest.

The bed felt like it would give way, but it never did. All my muscles tensed, I almost collapsed on top of her. A piece of her hair clung to my lip. I brushed it off and rolled onto my back, my face hot, hands tired.

“Sorry.” I turned onto my side, facing away from her.

She touched my back gently. Soon I heard the deep, steady breaths of sleep.

I woke up at nine-thirty. Devin was downstairs; Jody’s car was still gone.

“Did you eat?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

I boiled water in the teapot, and emptied two instant oatmeal packets into each bowl. Steam rolled upward as I poured water over the oats. I put a pinch of brown sugar in hers and more in mine.

“I’ve never been to a Jewish funeral,” she said as we sat at the kitchen table, stirring our oatmeal.

“Me neither.” I looked over at her. “Actually I’ve never been to a Jewish anything.”

She put her hand on my knee.

“He wasn’t really my father.”

She blew on her spoon and waited for me to continue.

“He was a sperm donor.”

“Seriously?”

I stared at her.

“So you’re like a test-tube baby?”

“Something like that.” I tasted my oatmeal; it was too sweet.

I put my suit on; it made me feel like a giant. Even my shoes felt tiny. Devin straightened my tie and brushed off my shoulders. “I think I’ll wait outside,” she said.

“What?” I looked down at my suit. I didn’t recognize my body.

“I’ll go with you. But I’m going to wait for you outside.”

We arrived at Temple Emmanuel about fifteen minutes before the service started. It was a short, but wide brick building with well-trimmed hedges.

The only clouds above us were light, wispy threads. The sun bounced off the pavement making it bright from every angle.

Devin looked me in the face. “Do you want me to come?”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

She leaned towards me and wrapped her right arm around my neck. “Good luck.” Then she leaned back a little and kissed me on the cheek. I stared at her for a moment, then opened the door and got out.

I walked in through the giant wooden doors and followed the stream of people to the left. A short, bony woman stood at the chapel’s entrance. She wore a long black robe and a white shawl around her shoulders. “Cantor Heit,” she said and held out her hand.

I shook it.

“I’m like a singing rabbi,” she said when I didn’t respond.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Yarmulke?” she gestured towards a basket sitting on the table next to the doorway.

I just stared at her.

She leaned close to me. “You don’t have to be Jewish,” she whispered. I watched a man pick one out and place it on the top of his head. I did the same. It was weightless; I worried it would fall off.

“Students are in that section,” she gestured towards the right.

“I’m not a student. I’m a relative.”

She raised her eyebrows the same way Devin did.

“Distant relative,” I said.

She pursed her lips like she wasn’t sure if she should believe me.

I leaned close to her and bent down a little. “I’m the son no one knew about.”

“Relatives are in the middle.” She averted her eyes.

The chapel was bright. Natural light spilled in through the windows near the ceiling. I took a seat three rows back. The coffin was propped open at the front, next to the pulpit.

I had never seen a dead person before. I spent the entire service staring at it, examining his profile. His body was rigid and his face was unnaturally serious. It looked forced, as if he might burst out laughing in the middle of the funeral. I smiled. From across the room an old woman with a stern face and deep wrinkles flashed me a disapproving glare. Everyone was dressed in black, but she was the only one who made it look theatrical. A feathery black hat perched atop her bright orange hair as her lacey dress clung to her torso. Everyone else looked dutifully boring.

My eyes fell back to the corpse. He was wearing a blue suit that was too big. The arms draped over his hands. The bottom half of the casket was closed. Maybe he had mismatched pants, or maybe he didn’t have any pants at all. I closed my eyes and shook the idea out of my head. I wondered where the tile had hit him. I thought about Devin and hated the idea of going back to Helena.

The rabbi switched back and forth from English to Hebrew. He had a strong, soothing voice and a beard that made him look both capable and wise. The Cantor sang in Hebrew; she had a strong voice for her size.

I spotted a college-aged boy in the front row. *A brother*, I almost said out loud. He had narrow shoulders and straight, matted black hair. A middle-aged woman sat to his right. She had the same slender shoulders and her dark, wiry hair was pulled back into a bun. I wondered if ex-wives grieve for dead ex-husbands. The back of her head didn’t make it obvious either way.

I wondered if children of sperm donors grieve for their dead fathers. I wondered if this particular one did. The inside of my head didn’t make it obvious either way.

A colleague from the university spoke for several minutes about Frank’s accomplishments and what he meant to the philosophy

department. It sounded rehearsed. I looked at the ark as he droned on.

I had never really noticed the void in my life, but my mom poked and prodded until a hole gaped, hollowed out by her constant reassurances that it was okay to be sad or angry. I remembered the first time she told me it was okay to be upset that I didn't have a father. I was six. Travis Culler's dad taught him how to shoot a BB gun. I told her I wanted a BB gun, too. She said it was healthy to be mad about not having a dad to teach me.

I looked at the man in the coffin. He probably didn't know how to shoot a gun anyways. Maybe it was better I never met him.

Frank's daughter talked for a few minutes too, but she didn't say much. She teared up near the end. Then the rabbi reminded us that the burial site was just off Colorado Boulevard and everyone stood, heads bowed, while he recited a prayer in Hebrew. Then the service was over.

Everyone made their way to the aisle; I followed the procession of black shoes. But once they got there, people turned toward the front of the chapel rather than the door; they were going for a close-up of the body. The line slowed to a crawl and then stopped. I shifted my weight from foot to foot. I didn't want to be that close to him, that close to death.

I watched other people stop in front of the casket. Most just bowed their heads for a moment and moved past, some touched him to make sure he was real, others nudged him to see if he would wake up. One child stood wide-eyed for several minutes, until an adult ushered him along.

Then I was staring at him. His skin was grey and his eyes were closed. I wondered what color they were. I searched his face for an answer of some kind, anything. But looking for familiar traits on something so lifeless was impossible. I hung my head. This would be my only experience of my father, dead. A corpse in a blue suit with no pants. I realized I never wanted this to be anyone's experience of me.

"I want to be cremated."

Someone cleared their throat behind me. It wasn't until then that I knew I had said it aloud. I took one last look at my father and headed to the door.

"Sorry," I said to no one in particular.

Cantor Heit was at the door again. She held out the basket of

spare yarmulke and I dropped mine in.

“What’s your name?” she asked before I could walk away.

“Trent.” She looked smug.

“I want you to meet Drew, Frank’s son.” The man with the matted black hair stood beside her. He extended his hand.

“I took his class a couple of semesters ago. Good man,” I said and shook it. He nodded absently, didn’t look me in the face.

“I’m sorry about your father,” I said, my voice catching on the last word. He nodded again.

The Cantor looked me in the eye; I glared at her for a moment and walked away. I made it outside. The wooden doors closed behind me. I felt small, tiny. My suit felt too tight; I loosened my tie. I found a small patch of grass and sat down.

I lay back and looked up at the clouds; they were thicker, but not menacing. I tried to be completely still.

“What are you doing?” Devin was standing above me.

“I’m trying to imagine what being dead feels like.” I closed my eyes.

“How’s it feel?”

“Itchy.”

The sun behind her sent shadows across her face. She sat down next to me. We sat in silence for a while. I steadied my breathing. She lay down. I could feel her looking at me.

I watched the clouds drift across the sky, change shape so slowly but so suddenly. I felt the blades of grass tickle my palms.

“What are you thinking about now?”

“I’m imagining what being alive feels like.” I breathed in deeply.

“How’s it feel?” Her voice sounded so soft.

“Itchy.”

She took my hand in hers. It felt foreign and familiar.

“That one looks like a heart.” She pointed into the sky.

It looked like a triangle to me. “Yeah,” I said. “Something like that.”