

# I



## TUESDAY, APRIL 24

*Today wasn't so bad. Carly seems to have made friends with the bottle finally. When my milk stopped she went on a hunger strike, pushed formula away like it was vinegar. Then she'd only take it from Aunt Jude, of all people. Never thought I'd be so happy to see her on a daily basis. But now even I'm allowed to feed her. Time marches on, I guess.*

*This isn't working.*

*Father Jake is now officially in the deep end without a life-guard.*

## THURSDAY, APRIL 26

*Dylan's pretending to play Monopoly. He just likes rolling the dice. I'm not allowed to play because I ruin it; he says he can't think what rules he wants to have when I'm watching. I know how he feels. I can't think what rules I want to have when I'm around, either.*

*Not sure why I'm trying this again. (See, Aunt Jude? Occasionally I do try.) Options seem to be dwindling since I jumped ship on the grief group she found on the Internet, Googling her way to my happiness. But, please, it was worse than bad. That facilitator was so annoying. Her lipstick was orange, her shoes were pointy, and she looked like an upscale elf. That constant*

*sympathetic nod she did made me want to throw my drippy tissue wads at her. Add six or eight people wailing in self-pity, and you might as well crack open the Chex Mix, because hey—it's a party!*

*I might tell Father Jake not to come anymore. Pretty much a waste of time, though I suppose it's good cover. After the grief group didn't work out, I figured Aunt Jude was planning an intervention. But all I got were visits from the boy priest, Father Listener.*

*He's the one who came up with this journaling idea, which is gimmicky and hideously '70s. (What's his next idea—a mood ring and a shag haircut?) If he had handed me one of those cheesy blank books with teacups or inspirational sayings on it, I would have dug out Robby's blowtorch and lit it up on the hood of that boring gray sedan Father drives.*

*Actually I would have just given it to Dylan with a box of Magic Markers. "Grief" makes you sound so melodramatic.*

JANIE CLOSED THE 89-CENT black-and-white-speckled composition notebook. It reminded her of one she'd had in third grade for the purpose of practicing her cursive writing. She would sit at Aunt Jude's kitchen table after school, gripping the pen as if it might get away from her and do some certain but unspecified damage. All those loops and slanty lines. So messy and complicated compared to the clear clean strokes of the printing she had been used to.

The doorbell rang, jolting Janie from her memory. She tucked the notebook in the cabinet above the refrigerator and forced herself to face the intrusion, hoping it wasn't another pity offering of quiche or lasagna or baked fucking ham. Friends and neighbors had stopped coming by, sensing, she knew, that their company was all but unbearable to her. It was just too hard to answer that stupid question over and over. "How are you?" She could barely keep herself from saying, *Still shitty, thanks for asking. Care for some ham? God knows I can't eat it.*

The man who now stood at the door carried nothing but a smudged manila folder. He scratched his fingers through the caramel-colored hair over a recently healed scar on his forearm. "Hi," he said, squinting into the room's relative dimness, the faint lines around his eyes clustering against each other. "Rob around?"

"No," said Janie.

"Uh, well, can you give him this?" He held out the folder. "I told him I couldn't start 'til summer, but then another job got postponed, so I'll start here next week. Permit's already pulled." He checked his watch, the crystal so scratched it must have been hard for him to see the face. "I'll pick those up tomorrow. If he wants to call me, the number's there."

The man waited for a response, which was not forthcoming. Janie stared back at him for a second, then glanced away. "Okay," he said, his lips flattening into a confused smile. He walked quickly to his truck. When he opened the driver's side door, Jane saw "Malinowski Custom Design, Inc." written in curling maroon script on the door panel. "Pelham, Mass." was in smaller type below it.

*He's from here, she thought. Not that it mattered.*

"Who was that?" Dylan asked, the little metal Monopoly dog bounding around the board.

"Some guy," said Janie, and tossed the manila folder on the stairs.

#### THURSDAY NIGHT

*It's my screened porch. Maybe a birthday present? Where on earth did he get the money—already paid for half of it. Already signed a contract with that Malinucci guy. He said he didn't need a new car, even though the Subaru was twelve years old. Said he'd ask for a raise at the bank if I wanted to hold off going back to work at the hospital. Robby, goddammit. I don't want the stupid porch now.*

SHELLY MICHELMAN BANGED ON the front door, opened it a face-width, and yelled "Hey!"

"It's open," Janie called from the back of the house. This was not very far. It was a small house, a Cape, the modern version of a Colonial style that had been built with zeal throughout the Boston suburbs in the 1930s and '40s. The front door opened directly into the living room. To the right was the kitchen, just big enough to hold a round butcher-block table and four chairs. The painted white cabinets, and counters devoid of all but the most necessary small appliances, kept it from feeling claustrophobic. A staircase divided the living room from the kitchen and led up to two bedrooms on the second floor, their ceilings slanting down toward eaves on the front and back of the house. Janie was in the tiny office behind the living room rummaging through bank statements.

"I know it's open," said Shelly, her heels clicking authoritatively on the muddy green manufactured tiles. "I opened it. What are you up to? What's that? Good God, this room's a mess."

Janie found Shelly's relentlessness exhausting, but Janie found most people exhausting these days. "I don't even know," she said.

"Pfff," said Shelly with a flick of her hand. "For a man who worked at a bank, you'd think he'd have kept his files better. Look at this, these dates are all mixed up. What are you in here for, anyway?"

"This guy came by yesterday . . . Malineski or something. I guess Robby hired him to build a screened porch on the front of the house."

"Ohhhhh," said Shelly, uncharacteristically still for a moment. "Tug."

"Pardon me?" Janie said, irritated.

"The builder. He did my renovation, remember? Very clean. You never have to clean up after him. Well, you know you have to vacuum all the time when you're under construction, but other

than that, I mean. No little slivers of wood or bent nails. No cigarette butts under your rhododendrons. You cannot *believe* what builders will do to your landscaping.”

“Shelly . . .” Janie wondered how it was that this woman, the next-door neighbor with whom she had managed a strictly wave-from-the-driveway relationship for the better part of six years, was suddenly in her house all the time now, issuing orders like the commander of a ship taking on water.

Shelly tapped the back of her index finger delicately under her nose. “Robby asked me for his number last fall. I think it was supposed to be a surprise.”

Janie felt the familiar tingling in her gums and the tightening of her throat. “You think maybe this was something you could have mentioned?” Janie told herself to calm down, take a breath. But that never worked these days. “You know, now that he’s DEAD?”

Shelly gave her a mildly apologetic nod. “I definitely would have, bub. You know, if I hadn’t been distracted with coordinating all those meals people were bringing and driving Dylan to preschool and all.”

Janie’s laugh served to help her exhale. “God, you’re such a bitch.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Shelly. She leaned closer and bared her teeth. “Spinach for breakfast. Any stragglers?” Janie inspected the big too-white teeth and shook her head.

“I have two houses to show, Pelham Heights,” Shelly said. Pelham Heights was a wealthy neighborhood on the north side of town. “Then I’m back to deal with this disaster. Just get the bank statements in order. That’s chronological, not alphabetical or astrological, or however the hell they’re organized now.” She tapped her mochaccino-colored plastic nails on the only clear spot on the desk. “Get them all straightened out and put them in a pile right here. Then have a cup of coffee and take the baby out in the backyard. It’s a beautiful day, for godsake.”

Janie stared at the pile of bank statements. *Goddamn him*, she thought, as her eyes began to ache.

Shelly patted Janie's disheveled black curls with her perfectly manicured hand. "Have the coffee first," she said. Then she clacked back through the living room and slammed the front door.

### FRIDAY, APRIL 27

*It's sunny. She loves that old airplane swing of Dylan's. The soft brim of her hat flaps up and down as she goes back and forth. She laughs and laughs.*

*Wish I could.*

AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK, JANIE heard the unimpressive hum of Father Jake's car in the driveway, the careful latching of the car door, the muted squeak of what she knew were rubber-soled black shoes coming up the asphalt. Those shoes. So him. Not sneakers, no, that would be too casual, almost disrespectful. But they weren't the standard-issue black leather shoes the previous pastor had worn. They were youthful, yet somber. So him.

Janie made sure to be at the door before he gave two light raps with the front of his knuckles, a sound that made her want to open the door just to slam it at him. Not one, not three, always two infuriating raps.

"Hi," he said, as if the way she whipped the door open and declined to look at him was how all parishioners greeted him. She strode toward the kitchen, and he followed. "Baby asleep?" he asked.

*No, she's out weed whacking the yard*, she thought. *She's always asleep when you come, and you always ask me the same dumb question.* "It's her naptime," Janie replied, running water into the teakettle and landing it hard on a stove burner. She put an empty mug before him as he sat at the kitchen table.

"Thanks," he said, and pulled a small packet out of his pants pocket. Black jeans, not slacks. Janie pinched the back of her hand

under the table to keep from rolling her eyes. Out of the packet came a teabag, a further expression, Janie sneered inwardly, of his utter lack of impact. When he left, there was no indication that he'd ever been there. You weren't even short a teabag.

He stayed for an hour. At noon, as he always did on Fridays, he rose from the round butcher-block kitchen table that Robby had assembled from a kit, placed the dead teabag in the trash, and put the mug in the sink. By the time his somber black sport shoes were squeaking back down the driveway, Janie could not remember one detail of their conversation. Not that she tried.

A LITTLE PAST NOON, Shelly returned peeling a grapefruit, its pale yellow skin a perfect match for the brighter streaks in Shelly's short, perky hairdo. Strangely, it also matched the silk shell she wore under the tailored beige suit. Was this purposeful? Knowing Shelly, as Janie had come to do in the three and a half months since Robby's death, it was a definite possibility. The woman's attention to detail was maddening.

After they'd pinpointed the payment Robby had made to the builder and determined that Janie could, in fact, afford the porch, Shelly announced, "I'm going out to Amherst tonight."

"When will you be back?" asked Janie, hating the faint tremor of panic that rippled through her.

"Sunday. Pammy's got a play."

"She's in a play?"

"No, she's on the sound crew. I'll be sitting in the audience watching *other* people's children perform a play called *Beth and Dawn and the Metaphysicality of Cheese*." Shelly flicked the underside of her nose and shook her head. "As you know, I wouldn't eat cheese to secure peace in the Middle East. I think the last time I had cheese I was wearing a training bra. What a stupid invention. Like boobs need training. Like they would act up if you didn't teach them to behave. Anyway, I'll be having a cocktail or three before the curtain goes up."

Janie had to smile despite herself. "Are you staying with her?"

"In the dorm? Are you insane? Do you have any idea what those dorms smell like? No, the minute Pammy got accepted to college I dug up an adorable little bed and breakfast. Arts and Crafts style, set back from the street, exposed wood beams. Very quaint, very Berkshires, but without the . . . you know . . . nature."

AT 12:52, JANIE STOOD outside Dylan's preschool classroom holding Carly, who was chewing noisily on a pink pacifier. The previous week Janie had taken her for a long-overdue checkup at the pediatrician's office. It was one of those group practices where you might get your actual pediatrician, the one you chose with such anxious care when you were still pregnant and naive. Or you might not. You might get the one who was just a little rough when putting your baby on the scale. Or the one who was not nearly as funny and endearing as he thought he was. *Or, thought Janie, you might sit in the waiting room with six or seven other mother-child pairs, in various states of impatience and snot coverage, while Dr. Whoever-Is-Next-on-the-List lights up a cigarette and checks the personal ads.*

Janie had not been late to pick Dylan up the day of the doctor visit, mainly because she had driven like a teenaged boy exiting a high school parking lot on a Friday afternoon. But she was the second-to-last mother to arrive at his classroom door, by which time he was clutching his teacher's hand and chewing madly on the dangling strap of his backpack. He lunged toward Janie, forgetting to release the viselike grip on his teacher, yanking her forward so that she banged her shin on the sand table.

Today Janie was first in line, as she had been every day except Tuesday, when she was third. On Tuesday, Dylan had said, "Why are you late? Did you go to the doctor again?"

"I'm not late, Dylan. I'm just not first," she'd told him. "Third has to be okay, too. Even last has to be okay every once in a while." *I'm doing the best I can*, she wanted to say. *That I get here*



*at all is a minor miracle some days.* She wanted to remind him that Shelly and Aunt Jude had been taking him to and from preschool until fairly recently. Even her cousin Cormac had left the bakery to swing him home a couple of times. She wanted him to be impressed with third and ecstatic about first. He had merely chewed his backpack strap and asked if they had any marshmallows at home. Which they did not.

Today, Friday, Janie was first again. She stood quietly while the mothers behind her chatted and exchanged things: tips on good roller-skate sales, recently released G-rated movies, cruise vacations. Borrowed baby clothes, forgotten lunch boxes, money for group teacher gifts. News about the upcoming tax hike, candidates for school committee, another unsolved burglary in the neighboring town of Natick. There was a whole Mommy Marketplace happening in the hallway, and if Janie were first in line, it was not considered rude to have her back turned to it. Or not that rude, anyway.

“. . . That’s nothing!” she heard a woman behind her say. “Barry loaded them into the car on Saturday. Brought not one blessed thing—not so much as a baby wipe. He’s always complaining that it takes me too long to round up all that stuff they don’t really need.”

The other mothers murmured their solidarity, “Mmmhmm . . . Oh, yeah . . . Been there . . .”

“They get back a few hours later,” the mother of Barry’s children continued. “They’re sunburned, covered in bug bites, the two-year-old has a massive load leaking out of his diaper, the five-year-old has dried blood on his leg from scraping his knee, and lunch was a half-eaten bag of barbecued potato chips they found on a park bench.”

There was a short burst of laughter, which was then oddly curtailed, as if the humor had gone out of it suddenly. *They’re looking at me*, thought Janie. The pity was palpable. Moments of silence followed. *I am the joy killer. My life is a cautionary tale.*

When the classroom door opened and Dylan came out, he needed to rummage around in his cubby for what seemed like decades. This gave a mother, whose name Janie no longer knew, a chance to approach. She was wearing tight black biking shorts and a neon orange polyester tank top. Her knife-straight blond hair evidenced a slight dampness around the bangs, but she wasn't actually sweaty. Her figure was gallingly perfect, no remnant puckers across her midsection, where babies had once rolled and punched from the inside; no breasts drooping from months of expansion and contraction as they ballooned up with milk, only to be sucked flat on an almost hourly basis.

"Would Dylan like to come over and play with Keane today?" Biking Mommy ventured. "Or, maybe if today isn't good, some time next week? Or, you know, any time you need a break . . . ?"

"Uhh," said Janie, briefly wondering whether Keane was a boy or a girl. Dylan's arms slipped around one of her thighs as he hid behind her, pressing his nose into the small of her back. "We're hanging close to home these days. But thanks."

"Okay, well, whenever he's ready," said Biking Mommy, inching backward toward the safety of her own child's cubby.

*And your little dog, too,* thought Janie.

**AT 1:30,** DYLAN LIKED to watch *Clifford the Big Red Dog* on PBS. *What a world, that Birdwell Island,* thought Janie, as the theme song rang out from the living room. There was "diversity" but no real cultural tension. There was one not-too-nice girl and her not-too-nice dog, but she always came around in the end. Everyone was, in a word, happy.

"I can't play right now, guys," said John Ritter, the voice of Clifford. "Emily Elizabeth told me not to get dirty before the party."

Janie couldn't watch *Clifford*. John Ritter's voice was one of the many things that was guaranteed to make her sob. John Ritter had died unexpectedly several years before, in his mid-fifties. He'd had a heart attack on his daughter's fifth birthday. These were

facts, and Janie had known them before Robby's death, when they had seemed distantly sad. Now they seemed emblematic of her life. Life in the real world, not terminally happy Birdwell Island. Janie lived in fear of the day that Dylan found out Clifford was actually a dead guy like his dad.

When the doorbell rang, Janie was sitting on the back of the toilet tank in the dark with a hand towel over her face to keep tears from dripping onto her T-shirt and betraying her to Dylan. Or whoever. She knew that Dylan would not open the front door. He would continue to sit six feet away from the small TV in the corner of the living room, legs crisscrossed in front of him, head tilted back, mouth slightly open. He wouldn't even hear the damned doorbell.

Possibly it was Aunt Jude, Janie's mother's only sister. Unmarried, retired, and childless, Aunt Jude had found a way to absorb, unbidden, whatever part of motherhood Janie's own mother seemed to neglect. Where Mum was quiet and, at times, distant, Aunt Jude was never at a loss for words. Or syrup of ipecac.

If it were Aunt Jude at the door, Janie knew she would ring a second time, and a third. Then she might very well assume that Janie had fallen into a diabetic coma (though she was not diabetic) and the children had drunk bleach, and Aunt Jude would have to heft her sizable bottom through a window and force-feed them all syrup of ipecac to induce vomiting. She carried ipecac in her white vinyl purse at all times. It was her antidote of choice, suitable for any occasion.

Janie ran one end of the hand towel under cold water and pressed it against her eyes and cheeks; with the dry end, she patted her face. She tossed it into the hamper and stepped into the lighted hallway.

"Door," droned Dylan, eyes still captive to the screen.

It was the contractor, wanting to know if Robby had gone over the papers. Dylan blinked and shifted his gaze to his mother.

"They look fine," said Janie, glancing at Dylan. If he hadn't been sitting there, having broken free of his Clifford-induced trance, Janie would have been able to continue with her "Robby's not here" tactic. It was not a lie. In fact, nothing could be truer. He was completely not there. This she knew to the core of her being, every minute of the day, in every possible way that mattered. Robby, who was so very much there for so many years, no longer was.

But Dylan did not understand the utter verity of this simple fact. Even a very mature four-year-old would be confused about the permanence of death, the book had said. Janie had only read a few pages, but she had retained that one thing: kids don't really get it. They have to talk about it—Janie tried but found it excruciating—and they have to see for themselves that it really is true over time. Her instinct was to shelter his boy-sized heart from the enormity of this loss. But evidently her instincts were wrong. For this one reason, and for the fact that Janie was sure she was failing Dylan in so many other important ways, she made herself say it out loud.

"My husband died in January, but I checked the papers myself, and everything seems in order." Actually it was Shelly who had reviewed the contract; Janie had merely stared at the plans until the lines blurred before her eyes. Knowing that Robby had dreamed up this porch, that he had meant to surprise her with it, compelled her toward it as if she were caught in a riptide.

The contractor's face fell. "Oh God, I . . .," he muttered. "I had no idea." He shook his head slightly, as if this might dislodge an appropriate response. "You're sure you want to . . . ? I mean, it's okay if you don't—"

"I'm sure," she lied, and tried to move the conversation up and out of the tar pit of her revelation. "So, how long's this thing going to take?"

"What?" he said. "Um . . . what?"

Janie enunciated, "How long will it take you to build the porch?" *You think this is hard for YOU?* she thought, the rage

monster snorting himself awake inside her. *You didn't even know the guy.*

"Oh yeah . . ." He scratched the red scar on his arm and tried to focus. "Well, lemme think . . ."

*Jesus H. Christ, it's a porch, not the Louvre,* she silently retorted. Rage monster rattled his chain.

"First we gotta . . . you know, dig the footings . . ." He saw her recross her arms, tighten her chin. "Six weeks," he said. "Starting Monday."

"A porch?" said Dylan, as Malinowski's truck pulled out of the driveway and the *Clifford* credits rolled. "Daddy likes that porch, you know the one we saw that time we went to that lady's house that time? It had that . . . that . . . that thing around and around up high?"

"A ceiling fan. Yeah, Daddy liked that."

"Are we going to have a ceiling fan?"

"I think so."

"Good. Daddy will like that."

## FRIDAY NIGHT

*Cormac, good cousin that he is, came by at 5:30, right when I was starting to slide into my pre-six-o'clock stupor. There are a lot of bad times of the day. I used to think the worst was right when I woke up, that moment before I realized I was alone. Not just alone, but you know, Alone. I think I'm getting better at that one, though. I think I'm starting to handle it.*

*Now six is the worst. Six is when he would be walking in the door from work, when I would be handing him the baby and saying "Tag, you're it" with a big sigh, and he would smile and kiss me and squeeze the baby. And Dylan would come barreling in and hang on the back of his belt until his pants were halfway down his nice, tight butt. And he would swing around, back and forth, saying, "Where's Dylan, where is that little bear?" and Dylan would howl with the satisfaction at having stumped him again.*

*Six still completely sucks. I am not getting better at it.*

*Cormac got me laughing, though. Some crack about Uncle Charlie. Wish I could remember it now.*

Janie stopped writing, pushing herself into a memory from her childhood. She hungered for moments like this, when her brain let itself be distracted with events that had occurred before the day her life had come to a grinding, colorless halt.

She remembered being young, fourteen or so. She and her twin brother, Mike, were up on the counters in this very kitchen, their feet dangling down, banging occasionally into the lower cabinets. Mike was working the cabinet door by his head, opening and closing it, studying the hinge as if it held a proof for the string theory. As usual, he barely heard the conversation, much less contributed. Cormac was sprawled in one of the kitchen chairs, not the chairs that were here now, but ones that had eventually become so irreparably battered that Janie had given them to Uncle Charlie, her mother's only brother, to take to the dump.

Janie had asked Cormac why he had such a thing about his father. He had said it was because Uncle Charlie named him Cormac, Irish for Charles. It was proof that he had had a son for one reason and one reason only—spare parts. "And believe me," Cormac had said, "he needs 'em."

The three of them had laughed at this, made funnier because Cormac and his father did look so much alike—huge, beefy Irishmen with thick black hair and pale blue eyes. Uncle Charlie was always so proud of his size, as if it were a personal accomplishment instead of a genetic outcome. Cormac would do impressions of him, like "Well, at six foot five and 254 pounds, I don't feel I need any help doing my taxes."

Cormac figured out how to keep all his own parts, though, Janie mused. He did whatever Uncle Charlie thought was unmanly. He took ceramics instead of wood shop. Janie couldn't imagine those huge fingers making anything smaller than a watering trough,

but he wasn't too bad. She still had a little mug-pot-bowl thing he had made her.

Freshman year in high school Cormac refused to join the football team and played tennis instead. He gleefully reported that you could have heard Uncle Charlie screaming and carrying on in the next county: "No one in the entire history of this family has ever hit a goddamned ball with a goddamned racket of any kind, and I'll be goddamned if any son of mine is gonna start! I swear to Jesus, if I see you in a pair of little white shorts, I'm not gonna be responsible for my actions!"

Cormac started playing tennis on the sneak, and as big and strong as he was, he had a serve that blew the briefs off any other kid his age. He started winning tournaments and getting his name in the paper. Uncle Charlie didn't know whether to blow a gasket or congratulate him. Then Cormac was named team captain, and Uncle Charlie started going to all the matches and yelling at the judges. It drove Cormac so crazy, he threatened to take up figure skating. He told Janie and Mike, "Pop's so steamed, I'm thinking of joining the friggin Ice Capades!"

Janie could see Cormac so clearly—the self-satisfied grin, the long, muscular legs splayed out across the kitchen floor. But the chair was wrong. The chair she saw now was one of a set that Robby had ordered from a do-it-yourself catalogue and came in parts. Janie wished she'd kept just one of those old chairs. It was from before, an inducer of memories. She picked up the pen and finished the journal entry.

*Thank God for Cormac at 5:30 with his box of day-olds from the bakery. Thank God for a six o'clock that doesn't completely suck.*